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THE  
MASTER OF THE CEREMONIES.

A Novel.

BY  
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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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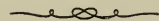
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# THE MASTER OF THE CEREMONIES.



## CHAPTER I.

MISS CLODE IS MYSTERIOUS.

RICHARD LINNELL had left his quiet, patient-looking father busily copying a sheet of music, and joined Colonel Mellersh, who was waiting at the door ready for a stroll.

Cora Dean's ponies were in the road, and that lady was just about to start for a drive.

Somehow, her door opened, and she came rustling down, closing her ears to a petulant call from her mother, and—perhaps it was an accident—so timed her descent that it would be impossible for the gentlemen to avoid offering to hand her to the carriage.

They both raised their hats as they stood upon the step, and she smiled and looked at Richard Linnell, but he did not stir.

‘Come, Dick,’ said Mellersh, with a half-sneer; ‘have you forgotten your manners?’

Linnell started, offered his arm, which was taken, and he led Cora down to the little carriage, the ponies beginning to stamp as the groom held their bits, while the bright, smiling look of their mistress passed away.

‘The ponies look rather fresh,’ said Richard Linnell, trying to be agreeable. ‘I should have their bearing reins tightened a little.’

‘Why?’ said Cora sharply, and with a glance full of resentment: and, at the same moment, she noted that Mellersh was leaning against the door-post, looking on.

‘Why?’ repeated Linnell, smiling in her face—but it was not the smile she wished to see—‘for fear of another accident, of course.’

‘What would you care?’ she said in a low whisper. ‘I wish there would be another accident. Why didn’t you let me drown? I wish I were dead.’

She gave her ponies a sharp lash, the groom leaped aside, caught the back of the carriage, and swung himself up into his seat, and away they dashed at a gallop, while Linnell stood gazing after them, till Mellersh laid a hand upon his shoulder.

‘Dick, Dick,’ he said banteringly, ‘what a fierce wooer you are! You have been saying something to offend the fair Cora. Come along.’

‘Does it give you pleasure to banter me like this?’

‘Banter, man? I was in earnest.’

They walked along the parade in silence, and had not gone far before they met the Master of the Ceremonies, who raised his hat stiffly, in response to their salutes, and passed on.

‘Oh, man, man, why don’t you take the good the gods provide you, instead of sighing after what you cannot have.’

‘Mellersh,’ said Richard, as if he had not heard him, ‘if I make up my mind to leave Saltinville, will you pay a good deal of attention to the old man?’

‘Leave—Saltinville?’

‘Yes; I am sick of the place. I must go right away.’

‘Stop a moment! Hold your tongue! There is that scoundrel, Rockley, with his gang.’

In effect, a group of officers came along in the opposite direction, and, but for the disposition shown them to avoid a quarrel, their offensive monopolisation of the whole of the path would have resulted in an altercation.

‘I shall have to cripple that fellow,’ said Mellersh, as they walked on, after turning out into the road in passing the group. ‘I wonder young Denville does not shoot him for his goings on with his sister.’

‘Mellersh!’

‘I can’t help it, Dick; I must speak out. Rockley is indefatigable there. The fellow is bewitched with her, and is always after her.’

‘It’s a lie!’ exclaimed Linnell.

‘Call me a liar if you like, Dick, my lad. I shan’t send you a challenge. Plenty of people will satisfy you as to the truth of what I say, and I speak thus plainly because I am weary of seeing you so infatuated with Claire Denville.’

Linnell tried to draw his arm away, but the Colonel retained it.

‘No, no, my dear boy, we cannot quarrel,’ he said. ‘It is impossible. But about this going away. Right. I would go. It will cure you.’

‘Cure me?’ said Linnell bitterly.

‘Yes, cure you. Dick, my boy, it makes me mad to see you so blind—to see you let a woman who looks guileless lead you—Well, I’ll say no more. I cannot believe in Claire Denville any more than I can in her little innocent-looking jade of a sister.’

Linnell uttered an impatient ejaculation.

‘She goes about with a face as round-eyed as a baby’s, and as smooth; while all the time I know——’

Linnell turned to him a look so full of agony that he ceased on the instant, but began again.

‘I cannot help it, Dick,’ he said. ‘It worries me to see you growing so listless over a passion for a woman who does not care a straw for you.’

‘If I could believe that,’ said Linnell, ‘I could bear it; but I am tortured by doubts, and every friend I have seems



to be bent upon blackening the reputation of a woman who has been cruelly maligned.'

Mellersh began to whistle softly, and then said, sharply :

'What! going in here?'

'Yes; will you come?'

'No,' said Mellersh, giving him a curious look. 'Expect a letter? Tut-tut, man, don't eat me. You would not be the first man who made a post-office of Miss Clode's circulating library. What is it, then—fiddle-strings?'

Linnell nodded.

'Go in, then; you can join me presently. I shall be on the pier. I say, Dick, the fair directress of this establishment ought to put up on her sign, "Dealer in heart-strings and fiddle-strings." There, good-bye for the present.'

The Colonel went on, keeping a sharp look-out for Cora Dean's pony-carriage; but it did not meet his eyes; and Richard Linnell turned into the library, meeting Lady Drelincourt, who smiled and simpered as she passed out, thrusting a book into her reticule.

Miss Clode was just disappearing into the inner room, leaving round-eyed Annie in charge; but as soon as that young lady caught sight of Linnell, she darted back to whisper loudly :

'Auntie, auntie: here's Mr. Richard Linnell.'

The latter saw no reason why little Miss Clode should

flush and turn pale, and then look up at him in a wistful manner, almost with reproach in her eyes.

‘Why, it’s quite a month since I’ve seen you, Mr. Linnell,’ she said, ‘and—and you look quite pale and thin.’

‘Do I, Miss Clode?’ he said, smiling. ‘Ah, well, it’s a healthy sign — of robust health, you know. I want some——’

‘But you don’t look well, Mr. Linnell,’ she said hastily. ‘Annie, my dear, take this book to Mrs. Barclay’s, and make haste back.’

‘Yes, auntie,’ said the girl, in an ill-used tone.

‘And make haste,’ cried Miss Clode. ‘Will you excuse me a minute, Mr. Linnell?’

‘Oh, of course,’ said the young man listlessly. ‘Give me the case with the violin strings, and I’ll select some.’

Miss Clode did not appear as if she heard him, but went to the back of the shop to hurry her niece away, to that young lady’s great disgust, for she wanted to stare at Richard, whom she greatly admired, and hear what was said. Consequently, he was left turning over the books for a few minutes before Miss Clode returned, and, to his surprise, stood gazing up at him wistfully.

‘Well, Miss Clode,’ he said with forced gaiety, ‘suppose somebody were waiting for me to join in a sonata?’

‘I—I beg your pardon,’ she cried, flushing, and turning

her back, she obtained the tin case that held the transparent rings, and placed it before him with a deep sigh.

‘Not well, Miss Clode?’ said Richard cheerfully.

To his astonishment she caught his hand in hers, and burst into tears.

‘No, no, no,’ she cried, sobbing violently, ‘I am ill—heart-sick. Mr. Linnell, please, pray come in, I want to speak to you.’

‘Why, Miss Clode!’ he exclaimed.

‘Yes, you are surprised,’ she exclaimed, ‘greatly surprised. You, so young and handsome, an independent gentleman, are astonished that a poor insignificant woman in my humble position should be always anxious about you—should—should—there, I can keep it back no longer,’ she cried passionately, as she held with both hands tightly that which he tried to withdraw. ‘I must speak—I must tell you, or you will wreck and ruin your dear life. Mr. Linnell—Richard—I love you. I love you so that I cannot bear to see and hear what I do—you are breaking my heart.’

‘Miss Clode!’ cried Richard Linnell, amazed, filled with contempt, sorrow, pity, all in one. ‘Think of what you are saying. Why, what madness is this?’

‘The madness of a wretched, unhappy woman, who has known you so long, and whose love for you is a hundred times stronger than you can believe. But hush! Come in

here. Some one may call at any moment, and I could not bear for them to see.'

She loosed his hand, made a quick movement towards the little door at the end of the counter, and held it open for him to pass in.

It was a painful position for one so full of chivalrous respect for women, and the young man stood trying to think of what to say to release himself in the best way from a situation that he would have looked upon as ludicrous, only that it was so full of pain.

'You are shrinking from me!' she exclaimed. 'Pray, pray, don't do that, Mr. Linnell. Have I not suffered enough? Come in; let me talk to you. Let me try and explain.'

'It is impossible,' he said at last sternly. 'Miss Clode, believe me that I will never breathe a syllable about this to a soul, but——'

'Oh, you foolish, foolish boy!' she exclaimed, bursting into an hysterical fit of laughter. 'How could you think such a thing as that? Is there no love a poor, weak, elderly woman like I am, could bear for one she has known from a boy, but such as filled your mind just then? There, there!' she cried, wiping her eyes quickly. 'I have spoken wildly to you. Forgive me. I am a poor lonely woman, who fixed her affection upon you, Richard Linnell, farther back than you can imagine. Listen, and let me tell you,' she said in a

soft, low voice, as she came round to the front of the counter, and laid her little thin hand upon his arm. 'You lost your mother long ago, and have never known what it was to have a mother's love; but, for years past, your every movement has been watched by me; I have suffered when you have been in pain; I have rejoiced when I knew that you were happy.'

'My dear Miss Clode!' he exclaimed, in a half-wondering, half-pitying tone.

'Yes—yes,' she panted; 'speak to me like that. You pay me for much suffering and misery; but don't—pray don't despise me for all this.'

'Despise you? No!' he said warmly; 'but you do surprise me, Miss Clode. I know you have always spoken very kindly to me.'

'And you have always thought it almost an impertinence,' she said sadly. 'It has been. This is impertinent of me, you think, too, but I shall not presume. Mr. Linnell, I have something to say to you, and when that is said, I shall keep my distance again, and it will be a secret between us.'

'Why, Miss Clode,' said Richard, trying to smile cheerfully, 'you are making up quite a romance out of one of your own books.'

'Yes,' she said, looking wistfully in his eyes, 'quite a romance, only it is all true, my dear. Now, will you come in?'

He hesitated for a moment, and then walked right in to

the parlour, and she followed him, wiping her red eyes with her handkerchief.

‘ You will sit down ? ’ she said, drawing forward an elbow-chair.

He took it from her and placed it so that she could sit down, while he took another.

‘ No,’ she said softly, ‘ I will stand. Mr. Linnell, please sit down.’

He smiled and looked at her, full of expectancy, while she stood wringing her handkerchief, and puckering up her forehead, her lips parted, and an eager look of pride in her eyes as she gazed at him.

‘ It is very good of you to come,’ she faltered. ‘ I will say what I have to say directly, but I am very weak, my dear—I—I beg your pardon, Mr. Linnell. Don’t—don’t think me too familiar. You are not angry with me for loving you ? ’

‘ How can I be angry ? ’ he said quickly. ‘ I am surprised.’

‘ You need not be,’ she said. ‘ You would not be, if you knew more of human nature than you do. Mr. Richard Linnell, it is in a woman’s nature to desire to cling to and love something. Why should you be surprised that a poor lonely woman like me should love—as a son—the handsomest and truest gentleman we have in Saltinville ? ’

‘ It is fortunate for me that we meet but seldom, Miss Clode,’ said Richard, smiling, ‘ if you hold me in such estimation as this.’

‘I do not see why,’ she said gravely. ‘You are handsome. You are brave. Do you think I do not know how you fought that duel below the cliff?’

‘Oh, tut-tut,’ he said quickly; ‘let that rest.’

‘Or how bravely you followed that Major Rockley the night when he carried off Miss Dean?’

‘My dear Miss Clode,’ said Richard quickly, ‘we shall be drifting into scandal directly.’

She looked at him pityingly, as she saw the flush upon his cheeks, and it seemed to be reflected in hers, as she spoke out now eagerly and quickly, as if she thought there was a risk of his taking offence and hurrying away.

‘I will not talk scandal,’ she said, standing before him with her hands clasped; ‘I only want to talk of you—of your future, and to try and stop you before you go wrong.’

‘Miss Clode!’ he exclaimed warmly.

‘Yes,’ she said; ‘be angry with me. I expect it, and I’ll bear it; I’ll bear anything to see you happy. If I had seen you taking the downward course—gambling, or drinking, or intriguing, I should have tried to stop you—tried fiercely, and braved your anger, as I do now. For I must—I will speak.’

‘I have neither been gambling, drinking, nor intriguing, Miss Clode,’ said Richard laughingly, ‘so I have not deserved your wrath.’

‘You are mocking at me, boy,’ she said, with spirit.



‘ You think me a foolish, eccentric little woman—half mad, perhaps. Think so,’ she cried, ‘ and, maybe, you are right ; but, with all my weakness and folly, I love you, Richard Linnell, as a mother loves her offspring, and it is to save you from future misery that I have nerved myself to risk your displeasure, and perhaps your future notice, for I am not so vain as to think I can ever be looked upon by you as anything but what I am.’

There was such warmth and sincerity in her words that Richard hastily took her hands.

‘ Forgive me,’ he said ; ‘ I am serious, and respect you for all this, Miss Clode.’

She bent down quickly and kissed his hands, making him start, and then look down on her pityingly, his wonder increasing as he saw how moved she was, her tears having fallen on the hands she kissed.

‘ There,’ she cried, ‘ I will not keep you, but I must say what I have on my mind, even if I offend you and make you angry as I did before.’

Richard Linnell looked at her sharply, with his eyes kindling ; but, without speaking, she joined her hands together and stood before him as if pleading.



## CHAPTER II.

MISS CLODE FEELS THAT SHE HAS DONE RIGHT.

‘THE woman is mad,’ said Richard Linnell, with a pitying look, and he made a movement as if to leave, but she caught his hand.

‘Pray—pray stay,’ she whispered, ‘and let me—let me speak.’

‘Well, speak,’ he said, in a low, angry voice, ‘but be careful of what you say.’

‘It is for your sake,’ she whispered. ‘You do not know what I do. It is my lot to hear and see so much. I only want to take the veil from before your eyes.’

‘If it is to blacken some one whom I respect——’

‘Whom you love, boy, with a foolish, insensate love. It is to save you from misery that I speak.’

‘To tell me some vile scandal that I will not hear,’ he cried.

‘That you shall hear, if I die for telling you, boy,’ she cried, catching his wrist with both her hands. ‘Strike me if you like. Crush me if you will, but you shall hear the truth.’

‘The truth—what truth, woman?’ cried Richard indignantly.

‘The truth about——’

‘Hush! you shall not speak her name,’ cried Richard furiously.

‘It is enough that you know,’ said little Miss Clode quickly. ‘Boy, boy, place your affection elsewhere, and not upon a woman who is about to elope to-night.’

‘It is not true,’ he cried furiously, ‘and I am a weak fool to stay and listen to such calumnies.’

‘It is true,’ said Miss Clode; ‘and it was to save you from the misery of discovering all this that I made up my mind to tell you.’

‘To have the pleasure of retailing this wretched scandal,’ he retorted scornfully. ‘Woman, you disgrace your sex by calumniating a sweet, pure woman.’

‘It was to save you agony and despair,’ she said piteously. ‘You might never have known of this. People work so slyly, and in such secrecy; and if you only knew how jealous I am of your future, you would not speak and look at me so cruelly as you do.’

‘Stop!’ cried Richard fiercely. ‘It was you sent me that wretched anonymous letter once?’

‘Yes,’ she said humbly—‘to save you from misery—to open your eyes to the truth.’

‘To open my eyes to a lie,’ he cried. ‘Miss Clode, enough

of this. I promised you that I would look upon this as our secret : let it remain so, and we know each other no more.'

He moved towards the door, but she clung to his wrist.

'That was a mistake,' she panted; 'but this time I am sure.'

'I will not listen,' he cried. 'Loose my wrist, woman.'

'You shall listen,' she cried. 'Richard Linnell, the post-horses are ordered, and Claire Denville leaves her home to-night with——'

He did not hear the rest, for he had reached the shop, and hurried away, nearly overturning Annie, as she came in to find her aunt in tears.

'Oh, auntie, what is the matter?' she cried.

'Look here,' whispered Miss Clode, 'are you sure there was no mistake in what you told me to-day?'

'Quite sure, aunt dear. Jane Moggridge told me that there were post-horses ordered for Major Rockley, and for Sir Harry Payne, and for Sir Matthew Bray.'

'That will do,' said Miss Clode quickly. 'Now go right away.'

Annie looked wider-eyed and rounder-faced than ever in her disappointment as she obeyed her aunt, while Miss Clode stood with her hands clasped to her side, gazing straight before her.

'Have I done right?' she said to herself; 'have I done wrong? It maddens me to see him so deceived—so blind.'

It was my duty to awaken him from his miserable infatuation, but suppose mischief should come after it ?

She turned ghastly pale, and clutched at a chair.

‘No, no,’ she cried, as she battled with her fears; ‘he is too brave and strong, and he will have Mellersh on his side. I have done right, I am sure. It is half breaking his heart, poor fellow; but better the sharp pain now than one that would last for life.’

## CHAPTER III.

### MR. BARCLAY IS BUSY.

JOSIAH BARCLAY sat at his writing-table, looking about the most uncompromising specimen of humanity possible, when the door was softly opened, and his man-servant came in.

‘And nine’s seventy-three,’ muttered Barclay, making an entry. ‘Hang the woman! I wish she’d come down and go on with these accounts. Well, Joseph?’

‘Lady Drelincourt, sir.’

‘Humph! Bless her! Let her wait. Seen that monkey again, Joseph?’

‘Isaac, sir? Denville’s Isaac?’

‘Yes, him. Dropped any more hints?’

‘Saw him last night, sir, at the Blue Posts.’

‘Well?’

‘Went on dropping hints again, sir, as soon as he had had a glass or two. ’Fraid he’s a fool, sir.’

‘Nothing to be afraid of in a fool, Joseph, so long as you keep him at a distance. So he chatters, eh?’

‘Yes, sir. Professes to have a mystery. He could speak if he liked, and there’s a deal he could say if he pleased, and lays his finger on the side of his nose, and all that sort of thing, sir. That’s been going on for months, and it’s what he calls confiding in me; but it never goes any further.’

‘And what do you think of it, Joseph?’

‘Nothing, sir,’ said Barclay’s confidential man drily. ‘I believe it’s all to make him seem important. Lived a long while in an artificial soil, sir, and goes in for shams.’

Barclay chuckled.

‘Don’t give him up, Joseph. I think he does know something, and it may be worth hearing. I find we can’t know too much. Does he confide in anyone else?’

‘No, sir, I think not.’

‘Well, don’t give him up. Now you can show Lady Drelincourt in: and while she is here run on to Moggridge’s. He has sent me a hint that a chaise or two are ordered for to-night. Find out who are going.’

Joseph nodded and went out, while Barclay was muttering to himself that he liked to make sure none of his sheep were going astray, when Lady Drelincourt was shown in.

‘Humph! I must send for my wife,’ said Barclay to himself. ‘It is dangerous when Venus invades one’s home;’ and he looked gravely at the overdressed, painted-up old woman, with his thoughts dwelling upon her likeness

to Lady Teigne—the murder, the missing jewels—and Isaac's mysterious communications to his servant when they met at the Blue Posts to smoke a pipe.

‘Ah, doctor,’ cried her ladyship playfully, ‘I’ve come to let you feel my pulse.’

‘Your pulse, Lady Drelincourt?’ said Barclay. ‘Surely your ladyship’s circulation is not low?’

‘Horribly, Barclay. I am fainting for want of the circulating medium.’

‘But your ladyship’s lawyers?’

‘Oh, I can’t go to them again, and be bothered about deeds.’

‘Your ladyship wants acts, eh?’

‘To be sure, and at once, Barclay. I want five hundred pounds.’

‘A large sum, my lady,’ said Barclay warily.

‘Stuff! A trifle. Just enough to take me on the Continent and back.’

‘Humph!’ said Barclay aloud; and to himself: ‘One of the post-chaises.’

‘Now, no nonsense, Barclay, or I shall be compelled to whip you severely with my fan.’

‘That ought to be a pleasure, madam,’ said Barclay politely. ‘But what security do you offer for five hundred pounds?’

‘Security! and from me, you wicked ogre!’ said her ladyship playfully. ‘Why, you ought to feel honoured.’

‘I do, my lady, greatly ; but——’

‘There, I don’t want to waste my time listening to stuff. I know what a close-fisted, miserly old wretch you are, and so I came prepared.’

‘Prepared, Lady Drelincourt?’

‘Of course. I only want a temporary loan, and here are my diamonds.’

She drew a morocco case from the large reticule hanging on her arm, and passed it across the table.

Barclay opened the case, took out a glittering necklet, breathed upon it, glanced at the rest of the contents of the case, replaced the necklet, and closed it.

‘Well, monster,’ said her ladyship playfully, ‘will that do?’

‘Admirably, my lady,’ said Barclay, taking a cash-box from a drawer, and counting out, with deft fingers, a number of notes. ‘Four fifty-five,’ he muttered, as he passed the rustling bundle across to his visitor, and slipped the case and cash-box back.

‘I must have no nonsense about those diamonds, Barclay,’ said her ladyship, ‘when I want them back.’

‘Your ladyship has only to sign this paper,’ replied Barclay, ‘and hand me £600, and the gems come back to their owner.’

‘Ah, Barclay, you are a dreadful ogre,’ she sighed, as she slipped the notes into her reticule. ‘You are quite as bad as a highwayman.’



‘Only more useful, my lady,’ chuckled Barclay. ‘Well, Joseph?’

The servant bent down and whispered :

‘Lord Carboro’.’

‘Humph!’ ejaculated Barclay. ‘Would your ladyship object to meet Lord Carboro’?’

‘Yes. Horrors!’ exclaimed her ladyship. ‘Or no, never mind; let him come up. I have called to inspect some of your china—these Sèvres jars.’

Barclay nodded to his man, who left the room; and, in support of her ladyship’s suggestion, the money-lender was saying: ‘It’s an opportunity, my dear madam, that does not often occur; the workmanship is unique,’ when Lord Carboro’ was shown in, and his keen eyes glittered as he took in the situation at a glance.

‘Ah, Lady Drelincourt, you here!’

‘Yes, I’m here,’ she said, ‘but I’ve not come to borrow money; have you?’

‘Yes,’ said his lordship sharply. ‘Barclay, a word with you.’

The money-lender bowed.

‘Don’t change countenance,’ said his lordship, ‘and talk about money. Get out your cash-box, and make believe to give me some.’

Lady Drelincourt walked to the window with a small vase, and took out her great, square, gold-rimmed eye-glass.

‘Money’s very tight just now, my lord,’ said Barclay aloud.

‘That’s right,’ said his lordship, in a low tone. ‘Look here, Barclay. I’d have waited till that old cat had gone, but time’s precious. Look here. I’ve had a nasty hint that hits me very hard. You’ll call me an old fool. Well, I am; but never mind. I shall never have her, but I love that girl of Denville’s, and, damme, sir, I can’t see her go to the bad without stretching out a hand.’

‘What have you heard, my lord?’ said Barclay, rattling his keys and opening his cash-box.

‘There’s some cursed plan afloat—elopement, or that sort of thing—to-night, I think; and we must stop it.’

‘We, my lord!’ said Barclay, jingling some coin.

‘Yes, we. You’re an old friend of Denville’s. I can’t go to him.’

‘Who’s the man?’ said Barclay.

‘Rockley, I think; curse him! Curse all these young, handsome men! Damme, sir, if I were forty years younger I’d be proud to marry her, for she’s a good girl—yes, sir, a good girl.’

Barclay nodded.

‘But of course I can’t expect her to take to a toothless, gouty old imbecile like me, poor child.’

‘What do you know, my lord?’

‘Oh, only a garbled set-out. I’m not quite sure how

things are ; and sometimes it seems that it's Sir Harry Payne, sometimes it seems to be Rockley. Now, look here, Barclay. Will you try with me to stop it? I couldn't bear it to come off. If the girl were going to the church with some true-hearted fellow, I should feel a twinge, but I'd settle a thousand or two on her, and say, "God bless her!" like a man ; but I can't see her go to the bad without making an effort to save her. Barclay, you old scoundrel, you're laughing at me, and calling me an idiot for taking you into my confidence like this.'

'You don't think so, my lord,' said Barclay sternly ; 'and you give me credit for being an honest man, or you would not talk to me in this way.'

'Honest?'

'Yes,' said Barclay sharply. 'Am I dishonest for making all the profit I can out of a set of profligates and fools?'

'Barclay,' said his lordship, 'if that old cat were not here I'd shake hands with you ; as it is, that kick under the table means it. Yes, I do trust you, and your good-hearted wife, too. Will you help me?'

'In every way I can,' said Barclay. 'Between ourselves, Lord Carboro', I've had a hint or two of an elopement to-night, and I'm going to see what it means.'

'You have had a hint?' said Lord Carboro' eagerly.

'Yes, my lord. I must have twenty-five per cent. The risk is too great,' added Barclay aloud. 'Drelincourt's

looking,' he said in a low tone. 'I'm not sure who it is yet, or what it means ; but there's something on the way, and I'll help your lordship all I can.'

'That's right, Barclay. I know you have wires all over the place, and can pull them. You started Moggridge, and I suppose, if the truth's known, you could arrange for a post-chaise to break down anywhere you pleased.'

'Your lordship gives me credit for being quite a magician,' said Barclay drily. 'However, I'll promise you this : Claire Denville shan't come to harm if Josiah Barclay can save her.'

'Thank you, Barclay,' said Lord Carboro' softly. 'I've not forgotten how she refused those pearls.'

'And cheated me out of a score of good jewel transactions with your lordship,' said Barclay, handing him a slip of paper and a pen, which the old nobleman took and signed in Lady Drelincourt's full view. 'You trust to me, my lord. I'll make all the inquiries necessary, and communicate with you to-night.'

There was a little mock exchange of papers, and then, pocket-book in hand, Lord Carboro' turned to Lady Drelincourt.

'I have finished my business,' he said. 'Shall I attend you down to your chair?'

As the couple went out of the room with her ladyship mincing and simpering, and giving herself airs, Barclay uttered a low growl.

‘I believe that old woman would make love to a mummy or a stone statue if she couldn’t meet with a man. How I do hate the old wretch to be sure!’

‘Now look here, Jo—si—ah,’ exclaimed Mrs. Barclay, entering the room. ‘I won’t have it, though I don’t believe it’s true.’

‘Don’t believe what’s true?’

‘That when anyone is by himself and talking aloud, he is holding a conversation with—there I won’t say whom.’

‘Pish!’ ejaculated Barclay angrily. ‘There, sit down, woman, and make an entry about Lady Drelincourt’s diamonds and the money I’ve lent on them. Set ’em down in the jewel book and then lock them up in the case. It wouldn’t do to lose them.’

‘Like her sister’s were lost,’ said Mrs. Barclay. ‘I wonder what became of them, Jo—si—ah.’

She opened the case, examined the jewels, and then opened a cabinet and an iron safe within, where she deposited the valuables, afterwards making an entry in a book kept for the purpose, and another in the big ledger.

‘That’s done,’ she said with a sigh of content. ‘Why, Jo—si—ah, what a rich man you are getting.’

‘Stuff! Don’t talk nonsense.’

‘I say, dear,’ she said, ‘I wonder how it is that Claire Denville hasn’t been here for so long. It seems strange. Here’s somebody else.’

The visitors proved to be Sir Harry Payne with Sir Mathew Bray, Mrs. Barclay hurrying out to leave them with her husband.

‘Well, gentlemen?’ said Barclay drily.

‘No, Barclay, it isn’t well,’ cried Sir Harry, ‘nor will it be till I’ve got a couple of hundred pounds out of you.’

‘And I one hundred,’ said Sir Matthew pompously.

‘My turn first,’ said Sir Harry, laughing. ‘Now, Barclay, two hundred, and no nonsense.’

Barclay shook his head, but his money was safe with Sir Harry, for he already held certain deeds that would cover principal and his large interest.

‘Now, Matt,’ said Sir Harry, ‘your turn.’

He thrust a sheaf of notes into his pocket laughingly, and Sir Matthew rolled up.

‘Now, Mr Barclay,’ he said, taking his friend’s seat, while that gentleman began inspecting china and bronzes, ‘I want only a hundred.’

‘Which you can’t have, Sir Matthew,’ said Barclay shortly. ‘You’ve got to the end of your tether, and I shall have to put you in my lawyer’s hands.’

‘What, just now, when I have only to go on to be a rich man?’

‘My dear Sir Matthew, for two years past I’ve supplied your wants, and you’ve been for ever dangling before my

eyes the bait of a rich marriage, when you would pay me back. No more money, sir, from me.'

'Barclay, my dear fellow, don't be a fool.'

'I've just told you that I do not mean to be,' said Barclay shortly. 'No hundred from me, Sir Matthew.'

'What, not if the matter were settled, and it was a case of posthorses, Dover, Continent, and a wedding abroad?'

'With some penniless girl,' growled Barclay.

'With a lady of property and title, sir. Hush! be quiet. On my soul, Barclay. It's all right and settled. A rich marriage.'

'Stuff, sir! If it were a rich marriage you would not need money.'

'Preliminary expenses, dear boy. I can't ask her to pay the postboys.'

Barclay looked at him keenly.

'Is this a fact?'

'Yes; to-night, sir. Honour bright. Don't spoil sport, Barclay.'

The money-lender pursed up his lips and twisted a pen in his fingers for a few moments.

'Well, Sir Matthew,' he said at last, 'I'll give you this chance. If it does not come off your commission is mine. You'll have to sell out.'

'And I will, Barclay. But there's no fear. The game's



won, sir. After a long siege the lady has at last surrendered.'

'A young and pretty woman, eh, Sir Matthew?'

'Well—er—not too young,' said the great dragoon 'I don't care for bread-and-butter misses.'

'Drelincourt, sure enough,' said Barclay to himself, as he wrote out the customary form on a bill stamp. 'Well, let the old fool marry him. He'll make her pay for it pretty sharply, I'll be bound. I shall get my money back, and he'll save his commission, which will go for future loans.'

'There, Sir Matthew, sign that, please,' he said aloud.

'Barclay, you're a gentleman. I'm a made man, and you shall have all the other bills taken up.'

He scratched his name across the bill, passed it back, and Barclay counted out some notes and gave them in exchange.

'That's your sort,' cried Sir Matthew, counting the notes. 'Why, Barclay, the bill was for a hundred. Here are only notes for sixty.'

'Quite right, Sir Matthew: the other is for the discount.'

'Oh, but——'

'My dear Sir Matthew, if you are dissatisfied, pray give me the notes, and I'll tear up the bill. You forget the risk. Those are my terms.'

'Oh, but, Barclay.'

'What's he making you smart, Matt?' cried Sir Harry, joining them. 'Just his way.'



‘I’ve offered to cancel the bill, if Sir Matthew likes,’ said Barclay.

‘Have you got any money at all, Matt?’

‘Yes, some, but——’

‘Hang it! Come along then, man; we’ve no time to lose. Come on and chance it.’

Sir Harry took his friend’s arm, and hurried him out, and Barclay was nodding his head thoughtfully as the door closed, but only for another to open, and Mrs. Barclay to enter and sit down, making the entries of his two transactions as a matter of course.

‘Old woman,’ said Barclay quietly.

‘Jo-si-ah!’ she said, turning to him quickly, and laying her hand upon his.

‘I try to think Claire Denville a good girl.’

‘I’m sure she is,’ cried Mrs. Barclay. ‘Oh, Josiah, why do you talk like that?’

‘Because things look ugly, old lady, and I shall be very sorry if you’ve been deceived.’

‘Oh, but, my dear,’ panted Mrs. Barclay, ‘I’m sure.’

‘One can’t be sure of anything with a pretty well-flattered woman. You know what you said about that row at Denville’s, when Sir Harry Payne was found with Claire that night.’

‘Yes: I said it was May, and I’m sure of it.’

‘You’re not sure, old lady—you can’t be. Suppose it was Claire after all.’

‘I say it was May. Claire Denville couldn’t do such a thing.’

‘I don’t know. I hope not,’ said Barclay. ‘I want to believe in her.—Well, Joseph?’

‘Two chaises to-night, sir, Moggridge says. Sir Harry Payne and Sir Matthew Bray.’

‘That will do. Well, old lady?’

‘It can’t be for Claire, Jo-si-ah, I’m sure,’ cried Mrs. Barclay. ‘She wouldn’t look at that miserable fop.’

‘Suppose he is jackal for Rockley, old lady?’

‘Oh, Jo—si—ah, don’t. It must be for her sister May.’

‘No, I think not. She and Burnett have got on all right lately, and Payne hasn’t been near her, that I know. Look here, old woman, I won’t believe it if I can help it, but it looks very much as if Claire is really going off to-night.’

‘Then she shan’t,’ cried Mrs. Barclay, beginning to cry. ‘If the poor girl has been worked upon just when she was poor and miserable, and has been weak enough to consent, she shall find she has got a friend who will stand by her, and give her good advice, and stop her. Jo-si-ah, I love that girl as if she was my own child—and——’

‘Well?’

‘I shall go down to their house and see her and talk to

her, and I shall stop with her till I know she's safe. That is, mind, if it's true. But it ain't.'

'Well,' said Barclay, 'you shall do so, for I don't want her to go wrong. Only mind this, it is suspicious that she has not been near you lately.'

'Not it,' said Mrs. Barclay, 'bless her! She's had some reason, and—there, that's her knock, I'll swear.'

She ran out of the room, and came back directly with Claire, looking more pale and troubled than ever, leaning upon her arm.

Mrs. Barclay darted a triumphant look at her husband, and Barclay took Claire's hand in a grave distant manner that made the visitor wince.

## CHAPTER IV.

### MRS. BARCLAY HAS HER TURN.

CLAIRE winced again, and involuntarily glanced at the door, repenting that she had come, as she saw Mrs. Barclay frown and make a series of grimaces at her lord, all of which were peculiar enough to a stranger, but which simply meant to the initiated: 'Go away and leave us together: I can manage her better than I could if you stayed here.'

Barclay comprehended from old experience all that his wife meant to signify, and, making some excuse, he shortly left the room.

'There, that's right, my dear,' said Mrs. Barclay warmly. 'Men are such a nuisance when you want to have a nice cosy chat. Why dear, dear, dear, how white you look. Your bonny face oughtn't to be like that. You've been wherriting yourself over something. It isn't money, is it?'

'No, Mrs. Barclay, we seem to have been a little better off lately.'

'But you are in trouble, my darling? Now don't say you

aren't, but speak out plain to me. Oh, I wish I could make you believe that I am a very, very true friend, and that I want to help you. There, I know : you've been falling out with Cora Dean.'

Mrs. Barclay prided herself on this as being a master stroke of policy to draw Claire out and make her ready to confide in her ; but Claire shook her head and smiled sadly.

'No,' she said dreamily, 'I am not in trouble about that. I thought I would call and see you to-day. There, I must go now.'

'Is that all?' said Mrs. Barclay in a disappointed tone. 'Why, I was in hopes that you were over head and ears in trouble, and had come to me for help.'

'Mrs. Barclay!' exclaimed Claire.

'No, no, no, my dear. What a stupid old woman I am ! I didn't mean that, but if you were in trouble, I hoped that, seeing how much you are alone, you had come to me for help and advice.'

Claire's face worked and her lips quivered. She vainly tried to speak, and finally, utterly broken down with the agony of her encounters on the previous day with Louis and her sister, with the following sleepless night and the despair of the present day, during which she had been vainly striving to see some way out of the difficulty, she threw herself upon the breast offered to receive her troubles and sobbed aloud.

‘I knew—I knew,’ whispered Mrs. Barclay, soothing and caressing the poor girl by turns. ‘I knew as well as if some one had told me that you were in trouble and wanted help. There, there, cry away, my darling. Have a good long patient one, and don’t hurry yourself. You’ll be a world better afterwards; and if you like then to tell me about it, why, you see, you can, and if you don’t like to, why, there’s no harm done.’

Even if the amiable plump old soul had said nothing more than the first sympathising words, Claire’s emotion, so long pent up, would now have had its vent, the tears seeming to relieve her overburdened brain as she clung to her hostess, listening, and yet only half hearing her whispered words.

It was perhaps as well, for with all its true-heartedness there was a comic side to Mrs. Barclay’s well-meant sympathy; and some of her adjurations to ‘cry away,’ and not to ‘stop it,’ and the like, would have provoked a smile from anyone who had been present at the scene.

‘There, there, there, then, that’s better,’ cried Mrs. Barclay, beaming in Claire’s face and kissing her tenderly. ‘Now you’ll be comfortable again; and now, my dear child, we’re all alone, and if you like to make a confidant of me, you shall find you can trust me as much as my Jo-si-ah can. But don’t you think I’m a scandal-loving old busybody, my dear, for I don’t ask you to tell me anything.’

‘You are always so good to me, Mrs. Barclay,’ sighed Claire, clinging to the ample breast.

‘Oh, nonsense, my dear. I only offer to be your confidant, so as to help you in your trouble. For you are in trouble, my dear—dreadful trouble, and it hurts me to see you so—hurts me, my dear, more than you think for, so what I say is—If it does you good to come and sit with me and be comforted by having a good cry over me, just as if you were my little girl, why you shall, and I shan’t ask you a single question; but if you think such a silly stout old woman can do you any good by giving you advice, or—now don’t be offended—finding you money; or by asking my Jo-si-ah what to do——’

‘Mrs. Barclay!’ cried Claire in tones of dismay, and with her cheeks flushing.

‘Ah, that’s the way of the world, my dear,’ said Mrs. Barclay with a quiet contented smile, as she drew Claire’s head back upon her shoulder, and stroked and patted her cheek. ‘You don’t know my Jo-si-ah. He seems a rough harsh-spoken old money-grubber, but he’s the tenderest-hearted, most generous man that ever lived. There, there, you needn’t speak. I was only going to finish and say Claire Denville has two true friends here in this house; and as for me, here I am, ready to help you in any way, for I believe in you, my dear, in spite of everything that has been said, as being as good a girl as ever breathed.’



‘Heaven bless you!’ exclaimed Claire, nestling to her; ‘you are a true friend, and I will tell you all my trouble.’

‘That’s right, my dear, so you shall, and two heads are better than one. Shall I help you?’

‘Oh, yes, yes, Mrs. Barclay, if you can. I am so helpless, so weak with this new trouble, I don’t know what to do.’

‘No; and you’ll be driving yourself half crazy, my dear,’ whispered Mrs. Barclay. ‘Why, I know as well as can be what it is.’

‘You know, Mrs. Barclay?’

‘To be sure I do, my dear. Now, why not let me ask him here some day, and just talk the matter quietly over with him?’

‘Yes, yes,’ cried Claire; ‘but he is so impetuous, and the situation is so horrible.’

‘Not a bit of it, my dear. Of course, he is impetuous. Enough to make him, hearing such things as he does; but just you let me get him here some day and have a chat with him, and then you see him, and try and understand each other. Never mind about the money, my dear: be poor and happy. Love’s better than riches; and the happiness enjoyed by two good people who really care for each other is—well, I don’t want to be single.’

‘Mrs. Barclay! What do you mean?’



‘Why, that with all his doubts and distances, Richard Linnell worships you as much as you love him.’

‘Oh, hush, hush, hush!’ cried Claire piteously. ‘Don’t talk about that, Mrs. Barclay. It is impossible.’

‘It isn’t, my dear, and that’s flat. You’re being cruel to him, and more cruel to your own dear self. Come, now, try and be advised.’

‘Mrs. Barclay,’ cried Claire wildly, ‘you don’t know. My trouble now is far greater than anything about self;’ and, clinging to the only friend she seemed to have, she told her all.

Mrs. Barclay sat with wide-open eyes to the very end, and then, in the midst of the terrible silence, she took out a violently-scented pocket-handkerchief, and wiped the dew from her brow, as she said softly :

‘Oh, my gracious me!’

‘It has driven me nearly mad,’ cried Claire, wringing her hands, ‘and while I stay here something terrible may have happened. I must go—I must go.’

‘No, no; sit still, my dear,’ cried Mrs. Barclay; drawing her back to her side, and speaking in a quick, business-like way. ‘I was quite knocked over by what you said. My poor, dear child! Is there to be no end to your troubles? But there, we mustn’t talk nonsense, but act sensibly. This is like a smash—a sort of bankruptcy, only it’s what Jo-si-ah would call social and not monetary. There, there, it’s a

terrible business, but I'm glad you've had the courage to tell me. Oh, my dear, I've always said to Jo-si-ah that she was a wicked little thing who was getting you into trouble. But let that go. Now, then, what to do first? Your poor father don't know a word?

'I have not dared to tell him.'

'No, and you've been screening her, and taking care of that little one, and—dear—dear—what a world this is! Tut—tut—tut! I am doing nothing but talk. Now, look here, Claire; the first thing that strikes me is that she must be got away—right away—for the present.'

'Yes, yes; but how?' cried Claire.

'Jo-si-ah shall settle that.'

'Mr. Barclay!' cried Claire in terror.

'To be sure, my dear. We want a strong man to act in a case like this. Your sister must be got away somewhere, and you must go with her. You had both better go to-night. No one shall know where you are but Jo-si-ah and me, and you can take care of her until Jo-si-ah has told your father all about it.'

'Yes,' sighed Claire, as her companion's calm, business-like manner impressed her.

'If we tell him first he will do no good, poor man, only be horribly upset, and there'll be no end of scenes, and no business done.'

Claire acquiesced with a look.

‘Then Jo-si-ah can settle it all with your father and Mr. Burnett, and this Mr. Gravani, what is to be done in a business-like way. There, there, let me finish. The weak little thing has got herself into this dreadful tangle, and what we have to do is to get her out the best way we can. It’s of no use to be sentimental and sit down and cry ; we must act like women.’

Claire looked at her in admiration, astounded by her friend’s calm, business-like manner.

‘Now, perhaps, my dear, my Jo-si-ah may upset all my plans by proposing something better ; but, as far as I see it now, you had better go straight off to your sister May—it will soon be dusk—and bring her here. I’ll be ready and waiting, and I’ll go with you both to the coach. You had better put on veils, and we’ll go right away to London. It’s the best place to hide, as my Jo-si-ah knows with the people who don’t pay him. Yes, that’s best. I’ll go with you.’

‘You will go with us, Mrs. Barclay?’

‘Of course, I shall, my dear, and stay with you till you’re out of your trouble, and Jo-si-ah has finished the business. Did you think I was a fine-weather friend?’

Claire could not speak ; her kisses and clinging arms spoke her thanks.

‘Yes, that’s as far as I can see it, and we must be quick.’

She rose to go to the bell.

‘What are you going to do?’ cried Claire, in alarm.

‘Ring for Jo—si—ah, and to send our Joseph to book three seats for the coach.’

‘But Mr. Barclay? Must you tell him—now?’ faltered Claire.

‘Why, of course, my dear, or we may be too late. Do you know that some one else is evidently making plans?’

‘What do you mean?’ cried Claire excitedly.

‘We know a great deal here, my dear. My husband has to keep an eye upon the slippery people who borrow money of him; and there was a hint brought here to-day that a certain gentleman was going to elope to-night with a certain lady, and the idea was that you were the lady. We know it was Sir Harry Payne.’

Claire caught at her friend’s arm as she went on.

‘But I said “No;” it is only a miserable scandal, based upon that wretched business at your house. “It’s Mrs. Burnett,” I said, “if it’s anyone.” Claire, my dear, she is in this dreadful fix, and she is going off to-night with that fop to escape from it.’

Claire’s lips parted as she looked at the speaker in horror, realizing it all now, and reading May’s excuse to gain time.

For a moment the deceit and cruelty of the act seemed too horrible; but she was now thoroughly realizing the nature of her sister, and was so agitated that she felt almost paralyzed as she stood gazing straight before her.

‘I cannot believe it, Mrs. Barclay,’ she said at last. ‘It is too terrible. My poor sister would never be so base.’

‘Go at once, my dear. Stand no nonsense with the little thing. I’ll settle it all with my Jo-si-ah. You bring her here.’

Claire was white as ashes now, as she caught Mrs. Barclay’s hands and kissed them.

‘No, no, my dear ; not my hands. There, go, and heaven bless you. We’ll help you through it, never fear.’

She folded Claire in her arms for a moment, and then hurried with her downstairs, and let her out.

‘One moment, my dear,’ she whispered, detaining her, to thrust her purse in her hand. ‘Stop for nothing. Bring her here ; drag her if she says she will not come. Say anything, but bring her here.’

‘Ah!’ sighed Mrs. Barclay, as she watched Claire disappear down the street, and then closed the door. ‘Now for Jo-si-ah.’

## CHAPTER V.

THE MASTER OF THE CEREMONIES IS STUNG.

JOSIAH BARCLAY was in his business room when his wife returned, panting and wiping her eyes, and he gave her one of his grim looks.

‘Well, old woman, I was right, wasn’t I?’

‘No, Jo-si-ah.’

‘Then you didn’t get it all out of her?’

‘Oh, yes, everything, dear. She told me all, and it is that wicked—wicked little woman, May.’

She told him all that had passed, and he stood and stared at her, blowing out his cheeks, and then looking his hardest.

‘Let me see,’ he said, when she had done speaking. ‘May Burnett is, of course, my own child by my first wife.’

‘Jo-si-ah! Why, you never had no first wife.’

‘Nonsense, woman.’

‘Nonsense, Jo-si-ah! Do you mean to tell me—now, how can you? Why, we’ve been married over thirty years, and

that wicked little hussy isn't above twenty. How can you talk such stuff?

'You set me going,' he said grimly. 'You talked as if May Burnett must be my own flesh and blood.'

'I didn't, Jo-si-ah. What do you mean?'

'Why you want me to mix myself up in this miserable scandal over a wretched, frivolous, heartless wench, spend my hard-earned money, and let you go off on a sort of wild goose chase with her and Claire Denville. I thought you had found out that she really was my own flesh and blood.'

Mrs. Barclay wiped her eyes, and indulged in one of her laughs—a blancmange sort of laugh—as she sat back in the chair vibrating and undulating all over, while her husband watched her with the most uncompromising of aspects till she rose.

'What a man you are,' she said at last. 'But there, don't let's waste time. You will help us, dear, won't you?'

'Us?'

'Yes; *us*, Josiah. Don't you think what I have proposed is the best?'

'Well, yes,' he said slowly. 'I do not think I could suggest anything better.'

'I *am* glad,' she said. 'Then send Joseph at once, and take three seats for London.'

'You mean to go, then?'

'Yes, dear, of course.'



‘And what’s to become of me?’

‘You will stop and see Mr. Burnett, and this Mr. Gravani, and poor Mr. Denville, and settle the matter the best way you can.’

‘For May Burnett’s sake?’

‘No, dear: for mine and poor Claire Denville’s; and look here, Jo-si-ah, you just beg her pardon, sir.’

‘If I do I’ll be——’

‘Hush! Stop, sir. I don’t mean to her. Now, just you own that you have misjudged her.’

‘Humph! Well, perhaps I have.’

‘That’s right, dear; and you will do your best now, won’t you?’

‘I tell you what, woman; I’ve read about men being fooled by their wives and turned round the thumb; but the way you turn me round beats everything I ever did read.’

‘Yes,’ she said, nestling to his side. ‘I like turning you round my thumb, dear; and let’s always go on to the end just the same, Jo-si-ah; and you’ll let me try to do some good.’

‘Humph!’ ejaculated Barclay, in his grimmest manner. ‘But, don’t you see, old lady, that this May Burnett is a worthless sort of baggage?’

‘I can’t see anything, dear, only that poor Claire Denville, whom I love very much, is in great trouble, and that we are wasting time.’

‘Wasting love, you mean,’ cried Barclay. ‘If you’ve got



so much love to spare, why don't you pour it on my devoted head, to wash away some of the hate which people bestow upon me ?'

'Jo-si-ah dear ! Please.'

'All right,' he said grimly. 'I'll do it, old lady. Let's see ; the coach goes at half-past eleven. You've plenty of time. I'll send Joseph. But tell me, where are you going ?'

'To the Bell, in Holborn, dear, for the first day. Then I shall take apartments somewhere till it is all settled.'

'But the expense, woman ?'

'I've plenty of jewels, dear. Shall I sell something ?'

'Yes, you'd better !' he said grimly. 'There, I suppose you must do as you like.'

She nodded and kissed him affectionately, while he seemed to look less firm in the pleasant light shed by her eyes as he handed her the keys of his cash-box.

'Now then, dear,' she said, 'business. Bless us ! Who's that ?'

There was a sharp rolling knock at the door, and they stood listening.

'I hope we're not too late, dear,' whispered Mrs. Barclay excitedly.

'Denville's voice for a guinea,' cried Barclay.

'Then you can tell him all, and you two can go and stop any attempt the silly little woman may make to run away.'

'Mr. Denville, sir,' said Joseph, ushering in the Master of

the Ceremonies, very pale and careworn under his smiling guise, as he minced into the room, hat in one hand, snuff-box in the other, and his cane hanging by its silken cord and tassels from his wrist.

‘ My dear Mrs. Barclay, your very humble servant. My dear Barclay, yours. It seems an age since we met.’

‘ Oh, poor dear man !’ sighed Mrs. Barclay to herself. ‘ He can’t know a word.’

She exchanged glances with Barclay, who gave her a nod.

‘ You will excuse me, Mr. Denville,’ she said. ‘ A little business to attend to. I’ll come back and see you before you go.’

‘ I should apologise,’ said Denville, smiling and bowing as he hastened to open the door for her to pass out ; and as he closed it he groaned as he said to himself :

‘ She does not ask after my children.’

‘ Sit down, Denville,’ said Barclay ; ‘ you’ve come to pay me some money, eh ?’

‘ Well—er—the fact is—no, Barclay, not just at present. I must ask you to give me a little more time. Morton, my son, you see, is only just launched. He is getting on, but at present I must ask a little forbearance. Interest, of course, but you will wait a little longer ?’

‘ Humph ! Well, I suppose I must, and—come, Denville, out with it. What’s the matter, man ? Some fresh trouble ?’

Denville had been playing uneasily with his snuff-box, and taking up and setting down his hat, glancing nervously about

the room. As Barclay spoke in this abrupt way to him, he started and stared wildly at the speaker.

‘Oh! nothing, nothing,’ he said, smiling. ‘I was only coming this way. Ha—ha—ha! my dear Barclay, you thought I wanted a little accommodation. No, no, not this time. The fact is, I understood that my daughter, Miss Denville, had come on here. I expected to find her with Mrs. Barclay—a lady I esteem—a lady of whom my daughter always speaks most warmly. Has she—er—has she called here this evening?’

‘Miss Denville was here a short time since.’

‘And has gone?’ said Denville nervously. ‘She—she—is coming back here?’

‘I think so. Yes, I believe my wife said she was; but, hang it, Denville, why don’t you speak out, man? What’s the matter? Perhaps I can help you.’

‘Help me?’ faltered the miserable man. ‘No; it is not a case where money could assist me.’

‘Money, sir! I offered the help of a friend,’ said Barclay warmly. ‘Come, speak out. You are in trouble.’

Denville looked at him hesitatingly, but did not speak.

‘I don’t ask for your confidence,’ said Barclay, ‘but you have done me more than one good turn, Denville, and I want to help you if I can.’

Still the old man hesitated; but at last he seemed to

master his hesitation, and, catching the other's sleeve, he whispered:

‘A scandalous place, my dear Barclay. I used to smile at these things, but of late my troubles have a good deal broken me down. I am changed. I know everybody, but I have no friends, and—there, I confess it, I came to speak to your wife, to ask her advice and help, for at times I feel as if the kindly words and interest of some true woman would make my load easier to bear.’

‘Nothing like a good friend,’ said Barclay gruffly.

‘Yes—exactly. You’ll pardon me, Barclay; you have been very kind, but your manner does not invite confidence. I feel that I cannot speak to you as I could wish.’

‘Try,’ said Barclay, taking his hand. ‘Come, you are in trouble about your daughter.’

‘Yes,’ cried Denville quickly. ‘How did you know?’

‘Never mind how I know. Now then, speak out, what do *you* know?’

‘Only that there is some fresh gossip afloat, mixing up my daughter’s name with that of one of the reckless fops of this place.’

‘Claire Denville’s?’

‘Yes, my dear sir. It is most cruel. These people do not think of the agony it causes those who love their children. I heard that my child had come here—ah, here is Mrs. Barclay back. My dear madam, I came to bear my daughter

company home, to stay with her, and to show these wretched scandal-mongers that there is no truth in the story that has been put about.'

'Have you told him, Jo-si-ah?'

'No, madam,' cried Denville; 'there was no need. Some cruel enemy contrived that I should hear of it—this wretched scandal. But you'll pardon me—the lies, the contemptible falsehoods of the miserable idlers who find pleasure in such stories. My daughter Claire has been maligned before. She can bear it again, and by her sweet truthfulness live down all such falsities.'

'But, Mr. Denville!' cried Mrs. Barclay.

'Hush, ma'am, pray. A father's feelings. You'll pardon me. We can scorn these wretched attacks. My child Claire is above them. I shall take no notice; I wished, however, to be by her side. She will return here, you say?'

'Yes, yes, my dear good man,' cried Mrs. Barclay; 'but you are blinding yourself to the truth.'

'No, ma'am, you'll pardon me. My eyes have long been open to the truth. I know. They say that my dear child Claire is to elope to-night with Sir Harry Payne. I had a letter from some busybody to that effect; but it is not true. I say it is not true.'

'No, Mr. Denville, it is not true,' cried Mrs. Barclay warmly. 'Our dear Claire—your dear Claire—is too good a girl, and the wretches who put this about ought to be

punished. It is not dear Claire who is believed to be going to-night, but——'

'You'll pardon me,' cried Denville, turning greyer, and with a curious sunken look about his eyes. 'Not a word, please. The scandal is against some one else? I will not hear it, ma'am. Mrs. Barclay, I will not know. Life is too short to mix ourselves up with these miserable scandals. I will not wait, Barclay. It is growing late. I shall probably meet my daughter, and take her back. If I do not, and she should come here, might I ask you to see her home?'

'Yes, Denville, yes; but, look here, we have something to tell you. Wife, it is more a woman's work. You can do it more kindly than I.'

'You'll pardon me,' said Denville, looking from one to the other, and smiling feebly. 'Some fresh story about my daughter? Is it not so, Mrs. Barclay?'

'Yes, yes, Mr. Denville,' she whispered; 'and you ought to know, though I was going to leave my Jo-si-ah to tell you.'

'Always good and kind to me and my family, dear Mrs. Barclay,' said Denville, smiling, and bending over the plump hand he took, to kiss it, with chivalrous respect. 'But no——no more tales, my dear madam; the chronicles of Saltinville are too full of scandals. No, no, my dear Mrs. Barclay; my unfortunate house can live it down.'

He drew himself up, took a pinch of snuff with all the refined style and air of the greatest buck of the time, and



handed his box to Barclay, who took it, mechanically helped himself noisily, and handed it back.

‘The old man’s half mad,’ he muttered, as he looked at him.

‘But Mr. Denville,’ cried Mrs. Barclay pleadingly; ‘you ought to know—you must know.’

‘Nonsense, madam, nonsense!’ cried Denville, with his most artificial manner reigning supreme, as he flicked away a tiny speck of dust from his frill. ‘We can laugh at these things—we elderly people, and treat them as they deserve.’

‘But, Mr. Denville——’

‘No, dear madam, no; I protest,’ he continued, almost playfully.

‘Jo-si-ah, time’s flying,’ cried Mrs. Barclay, in a pathetic manner that was absolutely comic. ‘What *am* I to say to this man?’

‘Tell him,’ said Barclay sternly.

‘Ah!’ ejaculated Mrs. Barclay, with a long sigh, as if she shrank from her task. ‘It must be done. Dear Mr. Denville, I don’t like telling you, but Mrs. Burnett——’

Denville reeled, and caught at Barclay’s arm.

‘Hold up, old fellow! Be a man,’ cried the money-lender, supporting him.

The old man recovered himself, and stood up very erect, turning for a moment resentfully on Barclay, as if angry

that he should have dared to touch him. Then, looking fiercely at Mrs. Barclay :

‘Hush, ma’am!’ he cried. ‘Shame, shame! How can you—you who are so true and tender-hearted—let yourself be the mouthpiece of this wretched crew?’

‘But indeed, Mr. Denville——’

‘Oh, hush, ma’am, hush! You, who know the people so well. Mrs. Burnett—my dear sweet child, May—the idol of my very life—to be made the butt now at which these wretches shoot their venomous shafts. Scandals, madam; scandals, Barclay. Coinages from the very pit. A true, sweet lady, sir. Bright as a bird. Sweet as some opening flower. And they dare to malign her with her bright, merry, innocent ways—that sweet young girl wife. Oh, shame! Shame upon them! Shame!’

‘Oh, Denville, Denville,’ said Barclay softly, as he laid his hand upon the old man’s shoulder.

‘Ah!’ he cried, ‘even you pity me for this. Dear Mrs. Barclay, I ought to be angry with you: but no, I will not. You mean so well. But it is all I have—in a life so full of pain and suffering that I wonder how I live—the love of my daughters—them to defend against the world. Madam, you are mistaken. My daughter—an English lady—as pure as heaven. But I thank you—I am not angry—you mean well. Always kind and helpful to my dear child, Claire. Ha, ha, ha!’



It was a curious laugh, full of affectation; and he took snuff again with all the old ceremony; but he did not close the box with a loud snap, and as his hand fell to his side, the brown powder dropped in patches and flakes here and there upon the carpet.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ he laughed again. ‘Calumnies, madam—I say it as I take my leave—the calumnies of false fribbles and envious women. Busy again with my dear children’s names. But we must live it down. Elopement! Pshaw! The coxcombs! The Jezebels! My child! Oh, I cannot mention her sweet, spring-flower name in connection with such a horror. It is atrocious.’

‘Denville,’ said Barclay, in answer to an appealing look from his wife.

‘No, no! Not a word, sir, not a word,’ cried Denville, raising his hand. ‘It is too absurd—too villainous. Madam, it is from your good heart that this warning comes. I thank you, ma’am, you meant to put me on my guard. Barclay, adieu, my good friend. You’ll shake hands. You’ll take no notice of this slight emotion—this display of a father’s indignation on hearing such a charge. Mrs. Barclay, if I have spoken harshly, you’ll forgive me. I don’t blame you, dear madam. *Au revoir!* No, no; don’t ring, I beg. I pray you will not come down. You’ll banish all this—from your thoughts——’

He stopped short and reeled again, dropping snuff-box,

hat, and cane as he clasped his hands to his head, staring wildly before him. The feeble affected babble ceased suddenly, and it was another voice that seemed to come from his lips as he exclaimed loudly in hot anger :

‘It is a lie! You—May! The girl I’ve loved so well—you! When my cup of suffering is brimming over. A lie—a lie, I say. Ah!’

His manner changed again; and now it was soft and full of wild appeal, as he cried :

‘May—May! My darling! God help me, poor broken dotard that I am! Shall I be in time?’

He made a dash for the door, but staggered, and would have fallen had not Barclay caught him and helped him to a chair, where he sat gazing before him as if at some scene passing before his eyes.

‘Blood,’ he whispered at last, ‘to the head. Help me, Barclay, or I shall be too late.’

‘No, stay here. I’ll go and do all I can.’

‘No!’ cried Denville fiercely. ‘I am her father, Barclay; we may save her—if I go too.’

He rose with nervous energy now, and gripping the money-lender’s arm they went together out into the dark street, where, indignantly refusing further help, the old man strode off, leaving Barclay watching him.

‘I don’t hardly know what to do,’ he said musingly. ‘Ah! who are you?’

‘His lordship’s man, sir,’ said a livery servant. ‘Lord Carboro’ says could you make it convenient to come to him directly?’

‘No, I’m busy. Well, yes, I will. Is he at home?’

‘No, sir; at the reading-room.’

‘Go on, then,’ said Barclay. ‘Tell his lordship I’ll be there directly.’

The man went off, and Barclay hurried indoors to speak with his wife, and came out five minutes later to join the old nobleman at the reading-room that answered the purpose of a club.

## CHAPTER VI.

### ON THE DOWNS.

HIGH up on the Downs behind the town lay a patch of wood, dwarfed and stunted in its growth by the sharp breezes that came off the sea. The soil in which they grew, too, was exceedingly shallow ; and, as the chalk beneath was not very generous in its supply of nutriment, the trees sent their roots along the surface, and their low-spreading branches inland, with a few shabby twigs seaward to meet the cutting blasts.

Right through this patch of thick low wood ran the London Road, and across it the coast road, going west, while a tall finger-post that had once been painted stood with outstretched arms, bending over a little old grey milestone, as if it were blessing it for being so humble and so small.

It was along this road that Richard Linnell, Mellersh, and James Bell had cantered, and then turned off at the cross, on the night of their pursuit, and the chalky way looked much the same beneath twinkling stars on the night succeed-

ing the day when Louis Gravani had had his interview with Claire, as on that of Mrs. Pontardent's party.

The similarity was increased by the presence of a yellow post-chaise; but it was not drawn up at the back of Mrs. Pontardent's garden, but here on the short turf close up to the trees and opposite the finger-post.

The chaise, an old yellow weather-beaten affair, seemed to be misty, and the horses indistinct in the darkness, looking quite the ghost of a vehicle that might be expected to fade away like a trick of the imagination, everything was so still. The very horses were asleep, standing bent of knee and with pendent heads. One of the wheelers, however, uttered a sigh now and then as if unhappy in its dreams, for it was suffering not from nightmare, a trouble that might have befallen any horse, but from the weight of the sleeping post-boy on its back. The man evidently believed in his steed as an old friend, and had lain forward over the pommel of his saddle, half clasping the horse's neck, and was sleeping heavily, while his companion, who rode one of the leaders, had dismounted and seated himself upon the turf where the road was cut down through the chalk, so that his legs were in the channel and his back against a steep bank.

They had been asleep quite an hour, when a quick step was heard, a misty-looking figure in a long grey wrapper, and closely veiled, came along the road, stopped short by

the post-boys, retreated and whispered softly as the turf opposite was reached :

‘Hist ! Are you there ? Oh, gracious ! What a wicked girl I am ! He has not come.’

The figure seemed to take courage and approached the chaise again.

‘He may be inside,’ she said softly, and going on tip-toe to the door her hand was raised to the fastening, when one of the wheelers snorted and half roused the mounted post-boy.

‘Hullo, then, old gal,’ he muttered loudly. ‘Yo—yo—yo—yo—yo ! Gate—gate.’

‘What shall I do ?’ exclaimed the veiled figure, and she seized one of the spokes of the wheel and clung to it as the other post-boy, slightly roused by his companion, took up his cry and shouted drowsily :

‘Yo—yo—yo—yo—yo ! Gate—gate !’

The horses sighed, and the men subsided into their nap, a long ride on the previous evening having made them particularly drowsy.

‘Talking in their sleep,’ said the veiled figure, raising herself and trying the handle of the chaise door, opening it, and reaching in to make sure whether it was tenanted or no.

‘Not come,’ she sighed. ‘He must be late, or else I’ve missed him. He is looking for me. Oh, what a wicked girl I am ! What’s that ?’

She turned sharply round, darting behind the chaise and among the trees as a faint sound was heard; and this directly after took the form of footsteps, a short slight man approaching on the other side of the road, stopping to gaze at the chaise and then backing slowly into the low bush-like trees, which effectually hid him from sight.

There was utter stillness again for a few moments, when the dull sound of steps was once more heard, and another short slight figure approached armed with a stout cane.

He kept to the grass and walked straight up to the sleeping postboys, examined them, and then stood listening.

‘Just in time,’ he said to himself. ‘Drowsy dogs! Ha—ha—ha! I wish Dick Linnell were here. I should like the fool to see her go. Hang it! I’d have given Harry Payne fifty to help him on the road if he had asked me. Get rid of her for good, curse her! I’m sick of the whole lot. Eh! What, the devil——’

‘What are you doing here, Burnett?’ said Richard Linnell, crossing the road from the Downs in company with Mellersh.

‘What am I doing? Taking the air. Did you think I was going to elope in a post-chaise. Hist! don’t speak aloud or you’ll wake the boys. But, I say—hang it all—have I been humbugged? Was it you then who were going off with Claire, and not Sir Harry Payne?’

‘Do you want me to horsewhip you, Burnett?’ cried Linnell in a low, passionate voice.



‘Not I. There, don’t be cross. I can’t help it, if she is going.’

Linnell turned from him impatiently, but Burnett followed.

‘Let her go, man. What’s the good of worrying about her? Better for both of us.’

‘Come aside,’ said Mellersh softly. ‘Here they are.’

Linnell seemed disposed to stand fast, but Mellersh took his arm.

‘Look here, my dear boy,’ he whispered. ‘You don’t want to interfere. Let her go.’

Linnell turned upon him fiercely, but he yielded to his companion’s touch, and they walked on some twenty yards, followed by Burnett, who was laughing to himself and rubbing his hands.

‘Lucky I heard,’ he said to himself. ‘I only want to be satisfied.’

The steps approaching were not those of a lady and gentleman, but of Lord Carboro’ and Barclay, who, in utter ignorance of anyone but the postboys being at hand, stood for a few minutes listening.

‘Yes, Barclay,’ said the former. ‘I could not bear for the poor girl to go without making a step to save her. I’m an old fool, I know, but not the first of my kind. I tell you, asking nothing, expecting nothing, I’d give ten thousand pounds to feel that I had not been deceived in her.’

‘Pay up then, my lord, for I tell you that you have been



deceived. Once more: the lady is May Burnett, her sister.'

'I'm assured that it is Claire Denville, and if it is, Barclay, I'll save her, damme, I will, if I shoot the man.'

'But, my lord——'

'Don't talk to me, sir. I tell you if I saw her going to the church with a fellow like young Linnell I'd give her a handsome present; but I can't bear for such a girl as that to be going wrong.'

'Unless it was with you, my lord,' said Barclay abruptly.

'You confounded rascal! How dare you!' snarled Lord Carboro'. 'Do you think I have no good feeling in me? There, you wouldn't believe in my disinterestedness, any more than I would in yours. Don't talk. What shall we do? Pay the postboys and send them off?'

'No, my lord: stand aside, and make sure that we have made no mistake.'

'If *you* have made no mistake,' said his lordship quickly; and he and his companion had hardly drawn aside into the convenient wood to swell the circle gathering round the intending evaders, when Richard Linnell made a step from his concealment and was arrested by Mellersh, as Burnett whispered:

'What are they here for?'

Just then one of the postboys yawned and stretched him-

self, making noise sufficient to awaken his fellow, who rose from the bank and flicked his whip.

‘How long have we been here?’ said the man on the horse.

‘Hours, and not a soul come. My ticker’s been asleep as well,’ he muttered, after pulling out his watch. ‘I believe the ’osses have been having a nap too. I say, I’m getting sick of this.’

‘Think they’ll come?’

‘Hang me if I know. Guv’nor seems to have been about right.’

‘Why, what did he say?’

‘You was there and heard him.’

‘No : I was in the stable.’

‘Said two po’chays was ordered, and he’d only horses for one. That it was certain as it was a ’loperment, that both parties wouldn’t come, and perhaps neither of ’em. If they did, Sir Matthy Bray and Sir Harry Payne had better fight it out, and the gals go home. Hist ! Is that them?’

The two men listened attentively as steps were heard, and the listeners in the wood were all on the *qui vive*.

Directly after, Sir Harry Payne came up.

‘Seen a lady, my lads?’

‘No, sir. Been on the watch ever since we come, and no one’s been near,’ said the first postboy.

‘Humph ! Past time. Horses fresh?’

‘Fresh as daisies, Sir Harry. Don’t you be afraid. No one’ll catch us.’

‘Are you sure you’ve both been watching? Not been asleep, have you?’

‘Sleep a-top of a horse, Sir Harry? Not we.’

‘Mount!’ cried Sir Harry to the second man. ‘Here she comes.’

What followed was the business of a few moments. A slight little veiled figure came panting up, and was caught in Sir Harry’s arms.

‘At last!’ he cried. ‘This way, little pet——curse the woman! What are you doing here?’

Claire Denville’s cloak dropped from her shoulders as, panting and utterly exhausted with the chase after her sister, she flung her arms about her and held her fast.

‘May!’ she panted. ‘Sister, are you mad?’

‘You’ll make me in a moment,’ cried Sir Harry. ‘Curse you! Why do you interfere?’

‘May!’ cried Claire again. ‘For pity’s sake—for the sake of your husband, do not do this wicked thing. Come back with me; come back. No one shall know. Sister, dear sister, before it is too late.’

‘Nay, it is too late,’ whispered Sir Harry. ‘Choose; will you go back to misery and disgrace?’

At the edge of the wood the scene was just visible, but the words were inaudible. Burnett had not at first recog-

nised his wife ; but Claire's voice rang out clear, and with a sneer he turned to Richard Linnell :

‘ There ! ’ he said. ‘ What did I say ? What are you going to do now ? ’

‘ Try and save your foolish wife, idiot, if you are not man enough to interfere. ’

He sprang out of the wood as he spoke, but ere he could reach the group, Sir Harry Payne, by a brutal exercise of his strength, swung Claire away from her sister ; and as she staggered on the turf she would have fallen but for the quick way in which Richard Linnell caught her in his arms.

She clung to him wildly, as she strove to recover herself.

‘ Help ! Mr. Linnell ! Quick ! my sister ! ’ she panted, as Sir Harry Payne hurriedly threw open the door of the chaise.

‘ In with you—no nonsense, now, ’ he cried to May. ‘ Be ready, my lads—gallop hard. I’ll pay ! ’

He was leaning towards the postboys as he spoke, but as the words left his lips they were half drowned by a piercing shriek that rang out upon the night, sending a thrill through every bystander. It was no hysterical cry, but the agony and dread-born appeal for aid from one in mortal peril.

Sir Harry held the door open, and stood as if paralysed by the cry, for as if instantaneously, a dark lithe figure had glided out from beneath the chaise, caught May’s arm, and, as the word ‘ *Pérfidia !* ’ seemed hissed in her ear, there was

a flash as of steel, and a sharp blow was delivered like lightning, twice over.

‘Curse you!’ cried Sir Harry. ‘Cowardly dog!’ He seized May’s assailant by the throat, but only to utter a low cry of pain, and stagger back from the effect of the heavy blow he received in the shoulder.

To the startled spectators at hand it was all like some scene in the half-light of a drama. No sooner had the dark figure rid himself of Payne than he glided rapidly beneath the chaise again, and before those who ran up to arrest him could reach the farther side of the vehicle, he had darted into the wood and was gone. Just then a voice cried :

‘Help ! for heaven’s sake, or she’ll bleed to death.’

## CHAPTER VII.

‘TOO LATE ! TOO LATE !’

THE words uttered by the first to run to May Burnett's help seemed to paralyse the party instead of evoking aid, while in the horror and confusion there was no attempt made to pursue, so stunned were all by the rapidity with which one event had succeeded the other.

Lord Carboro' was the first to recover himself.

‘This is no place for you, Miss Denville,’ he said. ‘Will you place yourself under my protection ? Or, no,’ he added hastily ; ‘ Mr. Barclay, take Miss Denville home.’

Barclay took a step towards Claire, who stood as if turned to stone, staring wildly at where her sister lay upon the turf, with Mellersh kneeling beside her, while Sir Harry Payne also lay without motion.

‘ Who was that man who struck Mrs. Burnett ?’ said Lord Carboro' sharply, but no one answered. ‘ Mr. Burnett,’ he continued to that individual, as he stood aloof looking on,

but speechless with mortification and rage. 'Will no one speak? Who is this? You, Mellersh?'

'Yes,' was the reply, in a low, pained voice. 'This is a terrible business, Lord Carboro'.'

'It generally is when a lady tries to elope and is stopped. Curse me, though, what a coward that Burnett was to set some one to strike her.'

'Did he?' said Mellersh, in a curious tone.

'Yes; didn't you see? Is she fainting?'

'Yes,' said Mellersh. 'Here, Linnell, help Miss Denville into the chaise, and she can support her sister.'

'No; I forbid it,' cried Lord Carboro' sharply. 'I——'

'Hush, my lord!' whispered Mellersh. 'Do you not see? The wretched woman is stabbed.'

'Stabbed!'

'Claire! Claire! Help! Claire!' wailed May faintly. At her sister's wild cry a spasm seemed to shoot through Claire's frame, and she wrested herself from Linnell, and threw herself beside the wretched little woman where she lay.

'May—sister,' she whispered.

'Take me—take me home,' said May, in a feeble, piteous voice. 'Did you see him? I was frightened. I was going and he—he stabbed me.'

'Help! A doctor! For heaven's sake, help!' cried Claire.

'May, May, speak to me—dear sister.'

She raised the frail little figure in her arms as she spoke,



till the pretty baby head rested upon her bosom, and Linnell shuddered as, in the dim light, he saw the stains that marked her dress and Claire's hands.

'Miss Denville,' he whispered, 'let Colonel Mellersh place her in the chaise. She must be got home at once.'

'Yes,' said Mellersh solemnly. 'I can do no more.'

As he spoke he gave a final knot to the handkerchief with which he had bound the slight little arm.

'Who did this?' cried Lord Carboro' quickly. 'Mr. Burnett, do you know?'

Burnett did not speak, and the answer came from May, in a feeble, dreamy voice.

'It was poor Louis,' she said. 'I saw him this evening—watching me—he must have followed. Ah!'

'Quick! Get in first, Miss Denville,' cried Mellersh. 'Draw her away, Dick, for God's sake! The poor little thing will bleed to death. Good heavens!'

The last words were uttered in a low tone, as from out of the darkness a tall gaunt figure staggered up and sank down beside the injured girl.

'Too late! Too late! May! my child! Blood! She is dead—my darling. She is dead!'

'Hush, sir! She has fainted,' cried Linnell. 'Mr. Denville! For heaven's sake, sir, be firm. Command yourself. A terrible mishap. Mrs. Burnett must be got back to the town at once. Can you act calmly?'



‘Certainly. I’ll try,’ groaned the Master of the Ceremonies; and then, ‘Too late—too late!’

He rose, holding one little hand in his as Claire tottered into the carriage, and May was lifted to her side.

‘Now, Mr. Denville. In—quick!’ cried Linnell. ‘Straight home. The postboys shall warn a doctor as they pass.’

The door was banged to, the orders given, and the next minute the horses were going at a canter, on no flight to London, but back to the Parade.

Richard Linnell stood gazing after the departing postchaise for a few moments, to start as a hand was placed upon his shoulder.

‘Is she hurt badly, Mellersh?’ he whispered.

‘Badly? Yes,’ was the reply. ‘I’m afraid it is the last ride she will take—but one.’

‘For heaven’s sake, gentlemen, lend a hand here,’ cried Lord Carboro’ impatiently; and they turned to where Barclay was now kneeling by Sir Harry Payne, that worthy having just struggled back from a fit of fainting.

‘Cursed cowardly blow,’ he said in a shrill voice. ‘Who was it—Burnett? Why couldn’t he call me out?’

‘Don’t talk, man,’ cried Lord Carboro’. ‘Here, Mellersh, the fellow’s bleeding like a pig.’

‘Am I?’ cried Sir Harry faintly. ‘D—— it. A surgeon. The postchaise.’

‘A knife,’ said Mellersh shortly, as he made as rapid an examination as he could in the darkness.

A pocket-knife was handed to him by Barclay, and he ripped up the coat and threw it aside.

‘Is—is it dangerous?’ faltered Sir Harry.

‘Dangerous enough for you to be more silent,’ said Mellersh. ‘Another handkerchief, please. That’ll do. Yes, I’ll use both. There, Sir Harry,’ he said, as he bound up the prostrate man’s arm, ‘we are only a mile from the barracks. You must contrive to walk.’

‘Sick as a dog,’ muttered Sir Harry; but he struggled to his feet with a little help. ‘Don’t—don’t let that little beast Burnett come near me. Mellersh, your arm.’

There was no need for his desire to be attended to, for Burnett had stood looking on for a few minutes, and then gone off, to be slowly followed by the others, the wounded man being compelled by faintness to halt from time to time till the barrack gate was reached.

Half an hour later Lord Carboro’ was in consultation with Barclay, Mellersh, and Linnell outside the Denvilles’ house.

‘Gravani?’ said Lord Carboro’, ‘to be sure—Louis Gravani. I gave him some painting to do when he was here. Italian—and the knife—a former lover, of course?’

‘Mrs. Barclay tells me, my lord,’ said Barclay, gravely, ‘that he was really Mrs. Burnett’s husband.’

'Dick,' said Mellersh, as they were walking slowly back, 'of what are you thinking?'

'Of Claire.'

Mellersh said no more, but when they reached home sat musing over the fact that there was a light in Cora's window, and that she was looking out. But it was not for him.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE FRIEND IN NEED.

THERE was quite a meeting at little Miss Clode's the next morning, after a heavy storm that had set in during the night; but, though the ordinary atmosphere was fresh, clear, cool and bright after the heavy rain, the social atmosphere grew more dense and lurid, hour by hour, as the callers rolled the news snow-ball on till Annie Clode's eyes looked as if they would never close again, and her mouth formed a veritable round O.

Miss Clode herself was in a state of nervous prostration, but she forced herself to be in the shop and listen, gathering scraps of information which she sifted, casting aside the rubbish and retaining only what was good, so as to piece together afterwards, and lay before herself what was the whole truth.

The accounts were sufficiently alarming; and among others it was current that Sir Harry Payne was eloping with Claire Denville, when Mrs. Burnett followed to stop

them, and Frank Burnett in a fit of rage and jealousy, stabbed her and Sir Harry.

Another account stated that it was Sir Matthew Bray who had stabbed Mrs. Burnett, and that he had been seized and put in prison for the deed, while Lady Drelincourt had gone mad from love and misery, and had been found by Fisherman Dick and a couple of friends six miles inland, lost on the Downs, drenched with rain, and raving so that she had had to be held down in the cart that the fishermen had been using to carry mackerel.

Everybody smiled at the word mackerel, and thought of French brandy for some reason or another.

This last business was as much canvassed as May Burnett's injury, for subsequent inquiry proved that Lady Drelincourt really had been brought home by Fisherman Dick, and that she was delirious and attended by two doctors.

Sir Matthew Bray, too, was certainly in prison, and nobody troubled him or herself to discriminate between an arrest for debt set about next day by Josiah Barclay, and one for some criminal offence.

The whole affair was like a godsend, just when scandal was starving for want of sustenance, and Saltinville at its lowest ebb.

Some one had seen the postboys, and knew that Lord Carboro' was up at the cross-roads, where he had gone to fight a duel with Colonel Mellersh over a card-table quarrel, and

they happened to be just in time to help May Burnett when her sister stabbed Sir Harry Payne.

Some one else quarrelled indignantly with this version, for she knew from Lady Drelincourt's maid that it was her ladyship herself, who in a fit of indignant jealousy had stabbed Claire Denville and Sir Matthew Bray, whom everyone knew she loved desperately, and that she had afterwards gone distracted because she had nearly killed Sir Matthew.

This narrator went off in high dudgeon on being openly contradicted, and told that she was entirely wrong, for the fact was that young Cornet Morton Denville, who saved Lady Drelincourt's pet dog, and for whom her ladyship had bought a commission, had challenged Sir Matthew Bray to fight with swords at the cross-roads. They had met, but Lady Drelincourt, in alarm, had gone and told Morton Denville's sisters, and they had all three gone up together in a post-chaise with Sir Harry Payne on horseback. They had come up just in the heat of the fight, and Sir Harry and Mrs. Burnett had rushed between them, and both been wounded; and in her horror at being the cause of such bloodshed, Lady Drelincourt had exclaimed, 'I would give my diamonds and everything I possess to be able to undo this terrible night's work.'

Such minute knowledge carried all before it, and for quite an hour this was the accepted version.

Somehow, Louis Gravani, save with three or four of the witnesses of the tragedy, dropped entirely out of the affair, going as suddenly as he had come, though he seemed always present in the little bedchamber on the Parade, where May lay almost at the point of death, muttering feebly, and appealing to him not to be so cruel as to kill her, because she always thought that he was dead.

The surgeon had done all that was possible, and he had consulted with the principal physician as to the course to be pursued ; and then, in the face of two grave wounds in the neck and breast of the frail, childish little creature, they had left her to the wild delirium that had set in—one whose fever was burning away rapidly the flickering life that was left.

The window was wide open, and the soft, low rush of the water upon the shingle floated in like soft, murmurous music through the flowers that it had always been Claire's pleasure to tend. Then a faint, querulous cry, oft repeated, came from seaward, where the soft grey-plumaged gulls swept here and there, and dipped down at the shelly shoals laid bare as the tide ebbed and flowed. It was a weird, uneasy sound, that accorded well with the painful scene in the chamber given up to the sick girl, by whose side stood Claire, pale and anxious, ready to fan the burning face, or rearrange the bedclothes tossed uneasily away.

Near the foot of the bed sat the Master of the Ceremonies,



grey, hollow-cheeked, and with a wild look of despairing horror in his eyes, as he gazed at his little fallen idol, for whom he had fought and schemed, and whom he had so obstinately held aloft in his own heart, to the disparagement of her patient, forbearing sister.

‘Is it true, Claire?’ he murmured at last; ‘is it true, or some dreadful dream? My child! My child!’

Then his face grew convulsed with horror, as May turned her face towards him, and began speaking rapidly:

‘Don’t, Louis—pray: don’t.—No: I am afraid.—Take me away quickly, dear.—No one will know, and I hate him so.—Little mean wretch!—They made me marry him, and I hate him more and more.—Hush!’

Denville groaned, and, as his head drooped upon his breast, Claire heard him murmur:

‘Is it a judgment—is it a judgment for the past?’

She shivered as she listened to his words, but a quick movement and a low cry of pain made her bend over her sister again.

‘Take me away,’ she said, after a few moments; and her pinched face bore a look of terror that stabbed those who watched with an agonizing pain. ‘I tell you I hate Frank, and I dare not meet poor Louis now. It is not he, but something from the dead. Claire—Claire—hold me. Sister, help! Don’t let me go. Am I going to die?’

‘May, May!’ whispered Claire soothingly, as she laid her

cheek against the burning face ; and the sick girl sighed, and made an effort to cling to her, but her feeble arm dropped heavily upon the coverlid.

‘Don’t let Louis come now. Is that Frank? Is that——’

She wandered off, muttering quickly and incoherently as she threw her head from side to side for a time ; and then, utterly exhausted, seemed to sleep.

‘Has—has Frank Burnett been?’ whispered her father, looking timidly at Claire.

She shook her head sadly.

‘No,’ said Denville ; ‘he will not come. He would not even if she were to die. She must get better ; and we will do as you have often said : go right away, where we are not known, and where we shall be safe.’

In spite of herself, Claire darted at him a horrified look, which he saw and winced at, as he rose feebly, and began to pace the room, stopping at length before the window to gaze out at the sunlit sea.

‘Strange!’ he murmured ; ‘the world so beautiful, and my life one dreary course of agony and pain. Claire, what do the doctors really think—that she will live?’

‘I pray God they do!’ said Claire solemnly.

‘Yes ; she must live and repent. There is pardon for those who suffer and repent, my child. Don’t look at me like that ; you do not know. Claire, is this my punishment? Surely no worse suffering can befall me now.’

‘Dear father,’ whispered Claire; ‘let the past be dead.’

‘Hush!’ he cried, grasping her hand; ‘Don’t talk of death, girl—here. She must live, and we will go away before—before it is too late. Has Morton been?’

Claire shook her head mournfully.

‘No; he would not come. He must not come,’ said the old man quickly. ‘He is well placed, and he must not come near such pariahs as we are. No, no; don’t look like that,’ he whispered passionately. ‘Why should he drag himself down? It is too much to ask of the boy.’

He went on tip-toe to the bed, and took the little feverish hand that lay outside the coverlid, and kissed and stroked it as he muttered to himself:

‘Poor little wandering lamb! So weak and timid, and ready to go astray; but you are safe here with me. Oh, how wrong everything is!’

Claire glanced at him, half stunned by this new trouble; and, as her father talked of punishment, and the impossibility of a greater trouble than this befalling them, a cold hand seemed to clutch her heart, and a vague, black shadow of another horror came back with double force, she shuddered, and devoted herself more and more to her task of attending the sister sick apparently unto death.

As she sat there, with the shadow of death impending, after the first shock, it seemed to lose its terrors, and she

found herself looking upon it as less dreadful than she had been wont to do. There was rest in it, and a cessation from the pain and suffering that had so long been her portion ; and, as the hours rolled on, her throbbing brain grew dull and heavy, her own suffering lighter, and she seemed better able to attend to the sufferer at her side.

Towards noon there was a soft knock at the front door, and Isaac—who had been planning with Eliza an immediate flight from the grief-stricken house, on the ground that, even if they lost their wages, it was no longer a place for them to stay at—opened it, and told the visitor that Miss Denville could see no one.

‘But me, young man,’ said the caller, quietly entering. ‘You need not say I’m here. I shall go up soon, and you have got to go on to my house for another basket like this, only bigger.’

She patted the one she carried—one which she had crammed with such things as she thought would be useful at such a time.

Isaac gave way, allowed Mrs. Barclay to go up to the drawing-room, and directly after called Eliza into his pantry to tell her that his mind was made up, and that they must go at once.

Mrs. Barclay did not hesitate for a moment, but went softly up to the bedroom, tapped gently, and turned the handle to enter on tip-toe.

‘I’ve only come to help, my dear,’ she said softly, as she clasped Claire in her arms. ‘We weren’t quick enough, my dear,’ she whispered, ‘or we might have saved all this.’

There was no reply, and after a time, in respect to Claire’s wishes, Mrs. Barclay went downstairs.

‘I shall be there if you want me, my dear. Don’t you go and think that you are left alone.’

Mrs. Barclay had hardly seated herself in the dining-room, and taken some rather grubby work from her pocket, when she heard a peculiar noise, and the bump of something being placed heavily upon the floor.

She listened, and heard some one ascend the stairs again, and there was a whispering, which ceased as the whisperers ascended, and then there was silence, and Mrs. Barclay took a stitch, and thought and wondered whether Cora Dean would come, or whether the Denvilles would be cut by everyone now.

Then she took another stitch, and rubbed her nose, which itched.

‘Poor little soul!’ she said to herself, ‘it’s come home to her at last. I never thought any good of her, but I’m not one to go on punishing those who’ve done wrong.’

Mrs. Barclay took another stitch and began to think again.

‘Jo-si-ah says if they catch the little Italian fellow, he’ll be transported for life, and if poor little Mrs. Burnett dies,

they'll hang him. Well, I don't hold with hanging people, so I hope she won't die.'

She took another stitch and drew the thread through very slowly.

'Jo-si-ah says Sir Harry isn't very bad, and the constable and a magistrate have been to see him, but he says he knows nothing hardly about it. Poor Claire! What a house this is! What trouble!'

She took another stitch.

'I wonder whether Richard Linnell will come. I shall begin to hate him if he doesn't stand by the poor girl in her distress. He's a poor shilly-shally sort of a fellow, or he'd believe in her as I do.'

There was quite a vicious stitch here.

'Perhaps, it isn't his fault. She kept him at a distance terribly, and no wonder with the troubles she's had; but of course he can't understand all that, being impetuous, like my Jo-si-ah was, and I dessay it will all come right at last. Now, what are they lumping down the stairs, making a noise, and that poor child so ill?'

She threw her work on the table, got up softly, and, just as there was a fresh bump and a whispering, she opened the door to find Isaac and Eliza standing over a box which they had just set down in the passage beside another, while Isaac in plain clothes and Eliza with her bonnet in her hand started at seeing the visitor.



‘Why, hightly-tighty, who’s going away?’ cried Mrs. Barclay wonderingly.

Eliza glanced at Isaac, who cleared his throat.

‘The fact is, ma’am, this young person and I have come to the conclusion that seeing how we suffered from arrears, and what goings on there are here, Mr. Denville’s isn’t the service in which we care to stop any longer.’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs. Barclay; ‘and have you told Mr. Denville you are going?’

‘Well, ma’am; no, ma’am. We have thought it is not necessary under the circumstances, and——’

‘Nor yet, Miss Claire?’

‘No, ma’am; she is too busy.’

‘Then just you take those boxes up again, young man, and take off that finery, and put on your livery,’ said Mrs. Barclay in a low angry voice. ‘Now, no words. You do as I say—there take those boxes up.’

The tone of voice, manner, and a hint about the wages had their effect. Isaac and Eliza glanced at each other, and took the boxes away without a word, Isaac coming back in livery a quarter of an hour later to tell Mrs. Barclay that ‘that soldier’ was at the back door.

Mrs. Barclay started and followed Isaac, to stare in wonder at the fine soldierly young fellow, who eagerly asked her a score of questions about Claire and May, and, declining to be questioned in turn, hurried away with troubled mien.



## CHAPTER IX.

MAY BEGINS TO SEE.

‘CLAIRE.’

It was the faintest whisper of a call, but she to whom it was addressed heard it, and leaned over the bed to lay a cool hand upon the little wistful face looking up from the pillow.

‘How long have I been lying here, Claire?’

‘Hush, dear; don’t talk,’ said Claire tenderly, ‘you are still so weak.’

‘Yes, but I must know. If you do not answer my questions, I shall fret and die sooner than I should do if you told me.’

‘Six weeks, dear.’

‘Six weeks!’ sighed May; ‘and it seems like a dream. Since I seemed to wake up the day before yesterday, I have been thinking about it all, and I recollect everything now.’

She spoke with perfect calmness, and as she went on, Claire’s brow wrinkled.

‘Poor old dad! How fond he is of me, and how ready to forgive me,’ she went on quietly. ‘Has Frank Burnett been?’

Claire shook her head.

‘Not once?’

‘No.’

‘Ah, well, I suppose he would not come. He felt that I was not his wife, and he was glad to cut himself clear from such an unhappy family. Has Sir Harry sent?’

‘May! dear May!’

‘I only wanted to know, Claire,’ said May quietly. ‘Don’t be angry with me, dear. It’s all over now. Is he better?’

‘I believe so. He has gone away.’

‘Thank God!’ said May fervently.

Claire turned upon her with wondering eyes.

‘Yes,’ she said again. ‘Thank God! I should not have liked to see him again, nor to know that he had been to ask for me. I am so weak, Claire. I always—I was so different to you.’

Claire sighed, and bent down and kissed the white forehead, beneath which the large eyes look unnaturally bright.

‘That’s nice,’ said May, with a sigh of content. ‘I wish I had been born such a girl as you. Always so calm and grave. I was so different. I used to feel, and I am sure of it now, that I was like one of the pretty little boats out there at sea, with the great white sails, that are blown over

sometimes for want of ballast. I never had any ballast, Claire, and that made me giddy.'

'Had you not better be silent now, May dear?' whispered Claire.

'No. Perhaps I may not be able to talk to you again, and I should like to tell you everything that is in my mind.'

'May, dear!' cried Claire, kissing her lovingly.

'You forgive me, then?' sighed May. 'I'm glad of that, for I want a deal of forgiving—here—and there,' she added, after a pause.

'Which may come the easier, dear, for a life spent in repenting what is past.'

'Yes; that would be easy, Claire, easy enough; but it is better as it is with me. I should be so weak and foolish again if I got well.—Claire.'

'Yes, dear.'

'Has poor Louis been seen again?'

'No: not since that night.'

May lay silent for a few minutes, and then said softly:

'It seems very cruel of him to strike me like that, but he had been true to me, Claire, and I was so weak I couldn't be true to him, and he is not like us; he is foreign, and loves and hates so passionately. It made him angry and mad against me. As soon as I saw him in the street, after I had written to ask Sir Harry to take me away, I knew there was danger, and I tried so hard to escape. I felt

obliged then. Sir Harry had often before begged me to go, but I never would.'

'Hush! May, I beg of you.'

'No: I must talk,' said May. 'I will speak softly so that it shall not hurt me much; but I want to be made happy by telling you everything and getting you to freely forgive me.'

'I do—I do freely forgive you, everything, May, dear sister,' whispered Claire, 'and you must get well quickly, so that we may go far away from here, and begin life afresh.'

'Yes,' said May, with a peculiar smile, 'far away, and begin life afresh.'

Claire saw her peculiar look, and held her tightly to her breast.

'Yes,' said May softly, 'it means that, dear. I've always been like a spoiled child. Poor papa has made me his idol, and I've been so weak and foolish. I can see it all now, since I have been ill. Claire, I hope they will not take poor Louis and punish him for this.'

'No, no, dear; he has gone far away; but pray, pray, say no more.'

'I must,' she said smiling. 'I have wasted so much time that I cannot spare a moment now. Ah, Claire, if I had been like you!'

'I wish you had been happier than ever I have been,' said Claire sadly. 'Now try and sleep.'

‘I want to talk to you about baby, Claire dear,’ continued May, without heeding her sister’s words.

She laughed softly, and her sister gazed at her in wonder, thinking that she was wandering again, as in the days of her long delirium.

‘I was laughing about baby,’ she said. ‘Such a droll little soft thing. I laughed when I saw it first, for we both seemed to be such bits of girls, and it seemed such nonsense for me to be the poor little tot’s mother. I have never been like a mother to it, though, leaving it always to strangers; but you, Claire, you will see to it, and be a better mother to her than ever I could.’

‘You shall get better, May, and make your little one a blessing to you when we are far away from here.’

‘Yes,’ said May with the same peculiar look, ‘far away from here. Poor little baby! Does my father know?’

‘Yes: everything now, dear.’

‘Oh, yes, I had forgotten: he kissed me as if he did, and forgave his weak, wilful child.’

‘How is she?’ whispered Denville, entering the room softly a few minutes later.

‘Asleep,’ said Claire in the same tone.

‘Is she—do you think she——’

He trailed off in his speech, and ended by looking imploringly in his daughter’s face.

‘I dare not say,’ said Claire mournfully. ‘Father, she is very ill.’

‘Then you must nurse her, Claire,’ said the old man excitedly, as he caught her hand to hold it tightly. ‘You must get her well, so that we can go—all go—far away—where we are not known. We cannot stay here in misery and debt and disgrace. Everything is against us now. My old position is gone. I dare not walk to the Assembly-Room, for fear of some insult or slight. I am the Master of the Ceremonies only in name. I am disgraced.’

‘Then we will go,’ said Claire sadly; ‘but it cannot be yet. Have patience, dear.’

She laid her hand upon the old man’s shoulder, and bent forward and kissed his cheek.

He caught her in his arms.

‘You do not shrink from me?’ he said bitterly.

‘Shrink? No, father; I am your child. Now, tell me—about money—what are we to do?’

Denville shook his head.

‘There is only one way out of the difficulty, Claire.’

‘A way, father?’

‘Yes; Lord Carboro’ spoke to me again this morning on the Parade. He came up to me like the gentleman he is, and just as I had been openly cut by townsman after townsman. He shook hands with me and took my arm, Claire,

and—and—I told him he might come here—to-day—and speak to you.’

‘Oh, father, what have you done? You have not taken money from him?’

‘No—no—no!’ cried the old man indignantly. ‘I have not sunk so low as that; but it was tempting. That man Isaac has grown insolent, and has twice come home intoxicated. Claire, I am the fellow’s slave while I am in his debt. I want to send him away, but I cannot. Hush!’

There was a double knock at the door, and Denville went softly down, leaving Claire with a fresh agony to battle against, for, few as had been her father’s words, they had been sufficiently plain to make her ask herself whether it was not her duty to give up everything—to sell herself, as it were, to this old nobleman, that her father might be saved from penury, and her sister placed beyond the reach of want; for her home must in future be with them.

‘Have we not at last reached the very dregs of bitterness?’ she said wildly. ‘Heaven help me in this cruel strait!’

The door opened softly, and Denville signed to Claire to come to him on the landing.

‘It is Lord Carboro’,’ he whispered. ‘You must speak to him.’

Claire shrank back for a moment, but her firmness returned, and she closed the door and followed her father to take his hand.



‘I would do everything, now, father, even to this,’ she said solemnly; ‘but it is impossible. Ask yourself.’

‘Yes,’ he said sadly, ‘it is impossible. But it is very hard—to see wealth and prosperity for you, my child, and to have to say *no*. But it is impossible. Speak gently to the old man. He has been a good friend to me.’

It seemed as if a mist was about her as Claire Denville entered the drawing-room, beyond which she could dimly see Lord Carboro’, looking almost grotesque in his quaint costume and careful get-up, fresh from the hands of his valet. He had been labouring hard to appear forty; but anxiety and the inexorable truth made him look at least seventy, as he rose, bowed, and placed a chair for the pale, graceful girl, and then took one near her.

The old man had prepared a set speech of a very florid nature, for, matter-of-fact worldling as he was, he had felt himself weak and helpless before the woman for whom he had quite a doting affection. But the sight of Claire’s grief-stricken face and the recollection of the suffering and mental care through which she must have passed, drove away all thought of his prepared words, and he felt more like a simple-hearted old man full of pity than he had ever been before.

He took her hand, which was given up unresistingly, and after a thoughtful look in the calm clear eyes that met his, he said slowly :

‘ My dear Miss Denville, I came here to-day, a vain weak man, full of the desire to appear young; but you have driven away all this shallow pretence, for I feel that you can see me clearly as what I am, an old fellow of seventy. Hush ! don’t speak my dear child till I have done. I have always admired you as a beautiful girl: I now love you as the sweet, patient, suffering woman who has devoted herself to others.

‘ Lord Carboro’——’

‘ No, no ; let me try and finish, my dear. I will be very brief. It would be a mockery to speak flattering follies to such a one as you. Tell me first—Did your father give you to understand that I was coming ?’

Claire bent her head.

‘ Then let me say simply, my child, that if you will be my wife and give me such love as your sweet dutiful heart will teach you to give to the doting old man who asks you, I will try all I can to make your young life happy, and place it in your power to make a pleasant home somewhere for poor old Denville, and your sister. We must bring her round. A trip abroad with your father, and——and——dear me——dear me, my child, I am rambling strangely, and hardly know what I say, only that I ask you to be my wife, and in return you shall be mistress of all I possess. I know the difference in our ages, and what the world will say ; but I could afford to laugh at the world for the few years I should be likely to stay in it, and afterwards, my child, you would be free and

rich, and with no duty left but to think kindly of the old man who was gone.'

Claire listened to the old man's words with a strange swelling sensation in her breast. The tears gathered slowly in her eyes as she gazed wistfully at him, wondering at the tender respect he paid her, and one by one they brimmed over and trickled down.

She could not speak, but at last in the gratitude of her heart, as she thought of the sacrifice he made in offering her rank and riches, after the miserable scandals of which she had been the victim, she raised his withered hand slowly to her lips.

'No, no,' he cried, 'not that. You consent then?'

'No, my lord,' said Claire firmly. 'It is impossible.'

'Then—then,' he cried testily. 'You do love someone else.'

Claire bowed her head, and her eyes looked resentment for a moment. Then in a low sweet voice she said :

'Even if I could say to you, Lord Carboro' my heart is free, and I will try to be your loving, dutiful wife, there are reasons which make it impossible,'

'These troubles—that I will not name. I know, I know,' he said hastily; 'but they are miserable family troubles, not yours.'

'Troubles that are mine, Lord Carboro', and which I must share. Forgive me if I give you pain, but I could never be your wife.'

The old man dropped the hand he held, and his face was full of resentment as he replied :

‘Do you know what you are throwing away?’ Then, checking himself, ‘No, no, I spoke angrily—like a thoughtless boy. Don’t take any notice of my words, but think—pray think of your father—of your sister. How you could help them in the position you would hold.’

‘Lord Carboro’,’ said Claire, ‘I am weak, heart-sick and worn with watching. I can hardly find words to thank you, and I want you to think me grateful, but what you ask is impossible. It can never be.’

The old man rose angrily and took a turn or two about the room, as he strove hard to fight down his bitter mortification.

Twice over he stopped before her, and his lips parted to speak, but he resumed his hurried walk, ending by catching her hands and kissing them.

‘Good-bye,’ he said abruptly. ‘I shall try to be your friend, and—and I never loved you half so much as I do now.’

He left the room, and Claire heard his footsteps on the path, and then, in spite of herself, she stole towards the window from which she saw him go slowly along the Parade, looking bent, and as if his coming had aged him ten years at least.

The opening of the drawing-room door roused Claire, and turning, she saw that her father had entered, and that he

was trembling as he gazed at her with a curiously wistful look that was one long question.

Claire shook her head slowly as she returned his gaze, with her thoughts reverting to the night when she sank fainting where she stood, and the notes of the serenade floated in at the window.

‘No, father,’ she said softly; ‘it would be impossible.’

‘Yes,’ he said feebly; ‘impossible!’

## CHAPTER X.

### THE STORM-CLOUD BURSTS.

THAT night, as Claire sat by the open window of her bedroom, where May lay sleeping, and the flowers that she had tended so carefully in the past for the most part withered and dry, her thoughts went back to the morning's interview with Lord Carboro', and there was a feeling of regret in her breast as she thought of the old man's chivalrous devotion.

Then her heart seemed to stand still, and again beat with a wild tumult as she told herself that the silent reproach she had felt was not justified; that it was her own doing, that Richard Linnell was not at her side. For that was his step, and she knew that he would stop opposite to her darkened window and gaze upwards before passing on.

There was pleasure and yet pain in the thought, for she felt that though it was impossible that they could ever even be friends, he must believe in her and she must dwell in his heart.

How often might he not have passed like that, and looked up, thinking of her !

It was a pleasant thought, but one that she dismissed at once, as if it were a temptation.

Trying to stop her ears to the sounds, she crept back from the window, and bent over May, who seemed to be sleeping more easily ; and a feeling of hope began to lighten the darkness in her heart, and the black shadow of dread that so oppressed her was forgotten, till, all at once, it came back, blacker, more impenetrable than ever, as the sound of voices loud in altercation rose from below.

Claire's heart stood still, and she held on by a chair-back, listening with her lips apart, and wondering whether this was the bolt fallen at last—the blow she was always dreading, and that she felt must one day come.

She crept to the door, passed out and listened, closing it after her that the noise might not awaken May, to whom sleep meant life.

Angry voices rose, and then there were the sounds of blows struck apparently with a cane. Then there was a scuffling noise, and the front door was driven back.

‘Leave the house, scoundrel ! leave my house, insolent dog !’ came up sharp and clear in her father's voice, quivering with anger, and the scuffle was renewed.

‘You pay me my wages ; you pay me what you owe me, or I don't stir a step.’



The voice that uttered these last words was thick and husky, and full of menace. It was a familiar voice, though, that Claire recognised, and her cheeks burned with shame as she felt that passers-by, perhaps Richard Linnell, would hear the degrading words that were uttered.

Her sister lying there sick, and this pitiful disturbance that was increasing in loudness, and must be heard by any one who happened to be upon the Parade!

She hurried down to find that the scuffling sounds had been renewed, and as she reached the passage it was to find that her father was trying to drag Isaac to the door, and force him into the road, where quite a little crowd was collecting.

‘Leave this house, sir, directly.’

‘I shan’t for you,’ cried Isaac, resisting stoutly. ‘I want my wages. I want my box.’

‘Leave this house, you drunken insolent scoundrel!’

‘Father! for pity’s sake,’ cried Claire, trying to interfere.

‘No, no; stand back, my child,’ cried the old man angrily. ‘He has come back again to-night tipsy. He has insulted me once more, and he shall not stay here—I can turn him out, and I will.’

‘Not you, and I shan’t go,’ hiccupped Isaac, seizing the plinth at the bottom of the balusters and holding on. ‘I don’t go from here ’thout my money—every penny of it, so now, old Denville.’

‘Pray, pray let me pass, father, and shut the door,’ cried Claire.

‘No, my dear,’ said the old man, whose blood was now up. ‘He shall leave this house at once.’

‘No, I shan’t leave neither without my box.’

The struggle went on, and the lamp would have been knocked off the bracket but for Claire’s hand. The contending parties swayed here and there, but it was evident that the footman was far the stronger, while Denville’s forces were failing moment by moment.

‘Can I be of any assistance, Mr. Denville?’ said a voice that thrilled Claire through and through, but which made her shrink back up a few stairs to avoid being seen.

‘Who’s that?—Mr. Linnell? Yes,’ panted Denville. ‘My servant, sir—my lacquey. This is the fourth time he has come back from being absent without leave, intoxicated, sir. Topsy. Not fit to come into a gentleman’s presence.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ laughed Isaac—‘Gentleman’s presence! I don’t call you a gentleman. Why, you’re all that’s mean and shabby and poor. Just you pay me my wages in arrears.’

‘Come to-morrow, scoundrel,’ said Denville loftily. ‘Mr. Linnell, if you would kindly send one of the people outside for a constable. He will find one by the Assembly Room. Let him say that the man is wanted at Mr. Denville’s—at the Master of the Ceremonies’, and he will come on directly.’

Linnell glanced up at where Claire was turning back in

shame and distress of mind, little thinking that in a few minutes she would be bravely standing at her father's side.

‘Fetch a constable!’ cried Isaac defiantly. ‘Do, if you dare. What do I care for a constable?’

‘Why don’t you pay the man his wages?’ said a voice at the door.

‘Ah, to be sure,’ cried Isaac, with a tipsy laugh. ‘Why don’t you pay the man his wages? ’Cause you can’t. Beggarly old upstart.’

‘Silence, you scoundrel!’ cried Linnell fiercely, ‘or I’ll drag you out and throw you over the cliff for your insolence.’

‘Do it—do it!’ cried Isaac fiercely. ‘Who’s afraid?’

‘Silence, dog!’ cried Denville, catching up his cane.

‘Don’t strike him, Mr. Denville,’ said Linnell. ‘Some one there fetch a constable. Five shillings for the first man who brings one here.’

‘Don’t you, m’lads,’ cried Isaac. ‘He daren’t send for a constable. I tell you he daren’t—not for me. Send for one for himself.’

Claire trembled and shuddered at those words; and, had it been possible, she would have ended the scene at any cost, but she was helpless.

For a moment Linnell had thought of seizing and dragging out the tipsy servant; but on second consideration he felt that it might just as well be done by some one in authority,

so, hurrying out, he despatched one of the crowd in another direction to that taken by the two or three who had hurried off on the promise of a reward, and then turned back to see if he could be of any further service.

‘Cons’able for me!’ said Isaac, with tipsy gravity. ‘I like that. I like that—much. Let him come. Make him pay me my wages. Then I’ll go. Not before, if all the old Masters o’ Ceremonies in England wanted me to go.’

‘The insolent scoundrel!’ panted Denville; ‘after all I’ve done for him since he came to me a boy.’

‘Done for me! Ha-ha-ha!’ laughed Isaac; ‘kept me on short commons, and didn’t pay my wages. Now, then, are you going to pay my money?’

‘Here he is.’ ‘Here’s one,’ rose in chorus, and way was made for the fussy-looking individual who occupied the post of chief-constable of Saltinville.

‘Now, then, what’s this?’ he said.

‘Tipsy servant,’ chorussed half-a-dozen voices. ‘Drunk.’

‘My servant, Mr. Cordy,’ said Denville importantly. ‘He has misconducted himself again and again. You see the condition he is in.’

‘Yes, I see,’ said the constable. ‘Come along.’

‘Wait till he pays my wages,’ hiccupped Isaac.

‘You can talk about that another time,’ said the constable importantly. ‘Come along.’

He seized the footman, gave him a shake which wrenched his fingers from their hold upon the bottom of the balusters, and with another shake jerked him upon his feet.

But Isaac was not going to be dragged off like that without making a scene, and he shouted out :

‘ Stop !’

‘ Well, what is it ?’ said the constable.

‘ Does he give me into custody, cons’ble ?’

‘ Yes. Come along.’

‘ Then I give him into custody—do you hear ?—custody—for murder. I won’t go alone.’

‘ There, come along, fool,’ cried the constable.

‘ No—not without him,’ cried Isaac. ‘ Murder !’

‘ Silence !’ cried Denville excitedly, as Claire rushed down the stairs and caught her father’s arm.

‘ Shan’t silence !’ yelled the man, who now threw off his half-tipsy, contemptuous manner, and seemed stung by the treatment he had received into a fit of furious passion. ‘ I give him into custody—for murder.’

‘ Nonsense ! Hold your tongue, and come along,’ cried the constable ; while Linnell seized the man on the other side, and hurriedly tried to force him out.

But it is not easy to get a man along a narrow passage if he resists fiercely ; and so they found, for, setting his feet against the edge of the dining-room door, Isaac thrust himself back, and yelled to the throng at the door :

‘Do you hear? For murder! I charge this man—Denville—with killing old Lady Teigne.’

‘Silence, villain!’ hissed Linnell in his ear, as he darted an agonized glance at where Claire was half supporting her father, while the black cloud she had seen impending so long seemed to have fallen at last.

‘Silence? When there’s murder?’ shouted Isaac. ‘I tell you I heard a noise, and got up, and then I saw him go to Lady Teigne’s room, the night she was murdered. Ask him there who did it, and see what he’ll say.’

‘Father, come away!’ panted Claire, as she threw herself before him, as if to defend him against this terrible charge.

‘What’s that?’ cried the constable. ‘Oh, nonsense! Come along.’

‘I tell you it’s true,’ cried Isaac, with drunken fierceness; ‘it’s true. I saw him go to her room. Let him deny it if he can.’

Denville stood up, holding tightly by Claire’s arm, and looking wildly from one to the other as a strange murmur rose amongst the fast-augmenting crowd. Then, as if it were vain to fight against the charge, he made a lurch forward, recovered himself, and sank into a chair, Richard Linnell catching sight of his ghastly countenance before he covered it with his hands.

‘It is a false charge, constable,’ cried Linnell hastily. ‘Take that man away.’

‘It’s all true,’ snarled Isaac, with drunken triumph.  
‘Look at him. Let him say he didn’t do it if he dare!’

As every eye was fixed upon him, the Master of the Ceremonies did not move; he made no bold defiance, but seemed half paralyzed by the bolt that had fallen—one from which his child had failed to screen him, though she had thrown herself upon his breast.



## CHAPTER XI.

### AFTER THE STORM.

MATTERS ran their course rapidly during the following days. The black cloud that had so long been threatening had come down lower and nearer, and had at last poured forth its storm upon Denville's devoted head. And now, as he sat thinking, all that had passed seemed misty and dreamlike, and yet he knew that it was true.

There was the finish of that terrible night, when, forced by the direct charge of his servant, the constable had taken steps against him. He had been arrested ; there had been magisterial examinations, and appeals to him to declare his innocency ; he, the magistrates' respected townsman, charged with this horrible crime by a drunken servant !

But he had made no denial, only listened with a strange apathy, as if stunned, and ready to give up everything as hopeless. In fact, so willing did he seem to accept his position that, after examination and adjournment — one of which was really to give the broken-down, prostrate man

an opportunity for making some defence—the magistrates had had no option but to commit the prisoner for trial.

All Saltinville had been greatly concerned, and thus taken off the scent of the previous trouble at the Master of the Ceremonies' house. The departure of Frank Burnett from the town, and the state of his wife's health, became exceedingly secondary matters. Sir Harry Payne's wound was of no more importance than Lady Drelincourt's rheumatic fever, brought on by exposure on the Downs at her age. People forgot, too, to notice that Sir Matthew Bray was clear of his arrest, and to heed the rumour floating about at Miss Clode's, that Lady Drelincourt had paid Sir Matthew's debts, her affection for the big heavy dragoon having received a strong accession from the fact that her love was no longer divided, her overfed dog having died, evidently from plethora.

Ordinary affairs were in abeyance, and everyone talked of Lady Teigne's murder, and metaphorically dug the old belle up again to investigate the affair, and, so to speak, hold a general inquest without the coroner's help.

Lord Carboro' took the matter down on the pier with him and sat at the end to watch Fisherman Dick shrimping; and as he watched him he did not think of the sturdy Spanish-looking fellow, but of Lady Teigne's jewels, and as he thought he tried to undo this knot.

‘If Denville killed the old woman for her diamonds, how is it he remained so poor?’

‘Thinking, Lord Carboro’?’ said a voice.

The old beau looked up quickly and encountered the dark eyes of Major Rockley, who had also been intently watching Dick Miggles, using an opera-glass, so as to see him empty the shrimps into his creel.

‘Yes: thinking,’ said Lord Carboro’ in a short, sharp way. ‘Like to know what I was thinking?’

The Major shrugged his shoulders.

‘Of the sea, perhaps, or the vessels passing, or Lady Drelincourt’s illness.’

‘No, sir,’ said Lord Carboro’ shortly. ‘I was thinking of Lady Teigne’s jewels.’

Rockley raised his eyebrows, and looked at the old man curiously.

‘Of Lady Teigne’s jewels?’

‘Yes, sir; and it seems a strange thing to me that if Denville killed the old woman for her diamonds, he has not become rich.’

‘To be sure,’ said Rockley; ‘it does seem strange.’

‘It’s all strange, sir, deuced strange,’ said the old man. ‘Took me aback, for I never suspected Denville, and I don’t suspect him now.’

They stood looking at each other for a few minutes, and then Rockley said quietly:

‘A great many people seem to believe him innocent. Do you think they will get him off?’

‘Yes, of course—of course, sir. It would be an abominable thing to bring such a charge home to the poor old fellow. Why, I suppose, sir, that even you would not wish that.’

‘I should be deeply grieved, my lord,’ said Rocklëy. ‘Good morning.’

‘The scoundrel’s still thinking about Claire,’ said the old beau, as he sat gazing after the handsome cavalry officer. ‘Well, it’s of no use to sit here. I’ll go up to Clode’s, and see if there is any news.’

He trudged slowly along the pier and the Parade, stopping now and then to take a pinch of snuff.

He was indulging in a very big pinch, standing by the edge of the path, when there was the trampling of hoofs, and Cora Dean’s pony-carriage was drawn up by his side.

‘Let me drive you there,’ said Cora’s deep, rich voice.

‘Drive me! Where?’ said the old man.

‘Where you ought to be going; to the prison to see poor Mr. Denville, and get him out. I haven’t patience with you people leaving the poor old man there—you who professed to be his friends.’

‘Hah! Yes! No, I don’t think I’ll trouble you, my dear Miss Dean,’ said the old man, recovering his balance, and

speaking in his old sarcastic tone. ‘You are such a female Jehu.’

‘Such a what?’ said Cora.

‘Female Jehu, my dear. You drive furiously, but you can’t control your steeds. I don’t want to be brought ashore in triumph. It’s all very well for you to come on to the beach like a goddess in your car, but to me it means rheumatism and pain. So, no: thanks.’

‘And you are going to leave Mr. Denville in trouble?’

‘Perhaps,’ said his lordship drily. ‘We’re a heartless lot down here, and I’m one of the worst.’

‘And you think that poor old man killed Lady Teigne.’

‘No, I don’t, my dear Miss Dean; but even if he had done so I don’t think he ought to be punished. It was a meritorious action.’

‘Oh, Lord Carboro’!’

‘It was, my dear madam; and if some enterprising party would come and kill off Lady Drelinecourt and your humble servant, and a few more of that stamp, it would be a blessing to society. What do you think?’

‘I think that a poor old man is lying in prison,’ said Cora Dean, tightening her reins; ‘that his broken-hearted child is tending a sick sister, and that the world of society talks about it all as if it were stuff sent on purpose to supply

them with news. Lord Carboro', I used to wish I were well in society. I don't wish it now. Good morning.'

'One moment,' said the old man hastily. 'You'll shake hands?'

He held out his, but Cora gave it a tap with her whip handle, and her ponies went off at a canter, leaving his lordship hat in hand.

'And looking dooced ridiculous,' he said angrily. And then, 'Confound the jade!' he muttered. 'How dare she!'

Then his wrinkled countenance changed, and a pleasant smile took the place of the angry look.

'Confound her! What a dig to give me with her sharp tongue. Well, it's true enough, and I like her for it. Does she like Claire, or does she hate her and pretend to feel all this? Who can say? The more you know of a woman, the greater mystery she seems. Poor old Denville! The place doesn't seem natural without him and his snuff-box. I miss him horribly. Now I wonder whether they'd miss me if I were to go—as I shall go—soon.'

He walked thoughtfully on.

'Yes; they'd miss me, and talk about me as if I were a confounded old curiosity, and make jocular remarks about my donkey—by George, how my corns shoot, I wish he were here. But no one will care when I'm gone—not one; and no one will be the better for my having lived.'

He walked on slowly, thinking of the last time he had seen Claire, and of the troubles that had fallen to her share, and then he muttered :

‘ Yes ! something must be done.’



## CHAPTER XII.

### FROM PARADE TO PRISON.

SUNKEN of eye, hollow of cheek, with the silvery stubble of many days' growth upon his chin, glistening in the bar of light that came through the grated window, Stuart Denville, Master of the Ceremonies at Saltinville, high-priest to the votaries of fashion who worshipped at that seaside shrine, sat upon his truckle bed, his head down upon his hands, his elbows on his knees, gazing apparently at the dancing motes in the well-defined ray of sunshine that illumined his cell.

It seemed as if he saw in those tiny motes that danced and rose and fell, the fashionable people who had so influenced his career; but hour after hour, as he sat there motionless, thinking of his arrest, his examination, the fashionable world was to him something that had never existed: he could see only the terminative.

On first picturing that terrible end, when, with hideous exactness, the scaffold, the hangman, and the chaplain whispering words of hope and comfort to the thin, grey-

haired, pinioned figure moving on in the slow procession had loomed up before him in all their terrible minutiae, he had shivered and shrunk away; but, after a few repetitions of this horrible waking dream, he had grown so accustomed to it that he found himself conjuring up the scene, and gazing at it mentally with a curious kind of interest that gradually became fascination.

As to the final stage, it would not be so painful as many pangs, mental and bodily, which he had suffered; and, as to the future, that troubled him but little. He saw no terrors there, only a long restful sleep, freed from the cares and sufferings that had for long past fallen to his lot.

There were no shudders now, but only a sad wistful smile and a sigh almost of content, the rest of the future seemed so welcome.

‘Yes,’ he said at last, as he pressed his trembling white hands to his lips, and left his seat to pace the cell, falling for the moment involuntarily into his old mincing pace, but stopping short and gazing up at the little patch of blue sky he could see; ‘yes—rest—sleep—Oh, God, I am so weary. Let it end!’

He stood with his hands clasped before him, and now a cloud came over his countenance, almost the only cloud that troubled him now. Claire; if she only could know—if he could tell her all—his temptations—his struggles—the long fight he had passed through.

Then he thought over his past—the mistakes of his life. How much happier he might have been if he had chosen differently. How piteous had been all this sham and pretence, what a weary existence it had been—what insults he had suffered for the sake of keeping up his miserable position, and obtaining a few guineas.

May !

The thought of his child—his favoured one, with her pretty innocent rosebud of a face and its appealing, trusting eyes. How he had worshipped that girl ! How she had been his idol. How he had believed in her and sacrificed everything for her sake ; and now—he lay in prison, one whom the world called murderer ; and she, his idol, to whom he had sacrificed so long, for aught he knew, passing away, and everyone turned from him and his family as if they were lepers.

Well, he was a social leper. He had made no defence. This man had charged him with the crime, and he had not denied it. What wonder that people shrank from him as if he were unclean, and kept away. It was his fate. The world turned from him—son—daughter. They feared the contamination of the gaol.

No suffering that the executioner even could inflict would equal the agony of mind through which he had passed.

He clasped his hands more tightly and gazed fixedly

before him, his lips moving at last, as he said in a low husky whisper :

‘ All forsake me now. The Master of the Ceremonies must prepare for the great ceremony of the law. Oh, that it were over, and the rest were come !’

He was at the lowest ebb of his misery amid his meditations and thoughts of home and the social wreck that was there with her thin baby face, when there was the distant sound of bolts being shot. Then there were steps and the rustle of a dress, the rattle of a great key in the door. Next the bolts of this were shot at top and bottom with a noisy jar ; the door was thrust open, and the gaoler ushered in a veiled figure in black. Then the door was closed, the locks and bolts rattled ; the heavy steps of the gaoler sounded upon the stone floor, and then the farther door opened and closed.

There was a moment’s silence before, with a quick rustling sound, veil and cloak were thrown aside upon the bed, and Claire’s soft arms clasped the wasted, trembling form, drawing the grey careworn face down upon her breast as she sobbed out :

‘ Father—father, has it come to this ?’

Denville remained silent for a few moments, and then with an exceeding bitter cry :

‘ My child ! my child !’ he wailed. ‘ I said you had forsaken me in my sore need.’

‘Forsaken you, dear? Oh, no, no, no!’ whispered Claire, fondling him as if he had been a child, and gently drawing him to the bed, upon which she sank, while he fell upon his knees before her, utterly weak and helpless now, as he yielded to the caresses she lavished upon him, and she whispered words that seemed full of comfort—forerunners of the rest he had prayed for so short a time before.

‘Forsaken you?’ she whispered. ‘Oh, my dear, dear father! How could you think it of your child!’

‘The world says I am a murderer, and I am in prison.’

‘Hush!’ she cried, laying her hand upon his lips. ‘It was only this morning I could get permission to see you.’

She laid her soft white hand upon his lips as she spoke, and then, seeming to make an effort and check her own emotion, she drew him closer to her.

‘Ah!’ he sighed as he clung to her; ‘and I always acted so unfairly to you, my child. But tell me—May?’

‘She does not know,’ said Claire earnestly. ‘In her weak state it might kill her.’

‘Perhaps better it did,’ said Denville solemnly. ‘Poor, weak, erring girl!’

‘Hush! Don’t!’ cried Claire. ‘Father, there is hope—there is forgiveness for us all if we show that we are indeed repentant. May is not like others. Always weak and wilful and easily turned aside from what was right. No: we must not despond. I must take you both far, far away,

dear. I have come for that now. You must advise with me and help me,' she said quickly. 'Tell me what I am to do—what I am to set about. Come, father, quick!'

'What you are to do?' he said sadly. 'Trust in heaven, my child: we cannot shape our own paths in life, and when we do try the end is wreck.'

'Father,' she cried impetuously, 'do you think I was speaking of myself? I want you to tell me whom to ask for help.'

'Help, my child?'

'Yes: for money. May I ask the Barclays? They have always been so kind. Surely they will help us now.'

'Help us——money?' he said vacantly.

'Yes, for your defence. We must have counsel, father. You shall be saved—saved that we may go far from here. Father, I cannot bear it. You must be saved.'

He was startled by the wildness of her manner and the fierce energy she threw into her words.

'You do not speak,' she cried imperiously, and she laid her hands upon his shoulders and gazed into his eyes. 'You must not, you shall not give up and let yourself drift to destruction. Why do you not tell me? I am only a woman. Father, what shall I do?'

'What shall you do?' he said mournfully.

'Yes, yes. Forgive me for what I say—I, your child, who love you most dearly now that you are in this terrible



trouble. Father, we must go away together to some distant place where, in a life of contrition and prayer, we may appeal daily for the forgiveness that is given to those who seek.'

He gazed in her eyes with his lip quivering, and a terrible look of despair in his face.

'Forgiveness for those who seek?'

'Yes, from a merciful God. Oh, father, if I wring your heart in what I say it is because I love you as your child.'

'Ah!'

A piteous sigh escaped his lips, and his head sank down upon his breast.

'You are silent,' she cried reproachfully, 'silent, when the time is so short. I shall be dragged from your side directly, and you have not advised me what to do. I must have money. I must get counsel for you and advice.'

He drew a long breath and raised his head, his lips parting but uttering no sound.

'Yes!' she cried, 'yes! Speak, father. Shall I go to Mr. Barclay?'

'No.'

'Then tell me what I shall do, dear. Pray rouse yourself from this despair. Speak—tell me. What shall I do first?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing? Oh, father!'



‘They say I committed this murder—that I crushed out the life of that miserable old woman. So be it.’

‘Father!’

‘I say—so be it,’ he repeated firmly. ‘The law says one life must answer for another. Well—I am ready.’

Claire wrung her hands, as he rose from where he had knelt, and gazed at him in pitying wonder and awe.

‘God is merciful,’ said the old man mournfully. ‘He readeth all our hearts. Claire, my child, I am not afraid to die. I am sick for the rest that is to come.’

‘But, father!’ wailed Claire.

‘My child, I know. I have thought of all. I have seen everything in the silence and darkness of this cell; but it is only a passing away from this weary life to one that is full of rest and peace. There is no injustice there.’

‘Father, you madden me,’ whispered Claire hoarsely. ‘You must not give up like this. Tell me what to do.’

‘Think me innocent, my child,’ he said softly—‘innocent of that crime. And now let us talk of yourself and your brother Morton.’

She noticed that he did not mention May’s name.

‘It is very bitter,’ he said. ‘I had hoped to provide for my child, but I was not able. But there, you are stronger of mind than I, and you will be protected. That woman, Mrs. Barclay, loves you, my child. But Morton, he is a mere boy, and weak—weak and vain, like his father, my

child—as I have been. Watch over him, Claire. Advise him when he is falling away.'

'Oh, yes, yes, yes, father; but you——'

'I shall be at rest, my child,' he said sadly. 'Do not think of me. Then there is——'

He paused for a few moments with his lips quivering till he saw her inquiring eyes, and with a heavy sigh he went on.

'—There is May.'

He paused again, to go on almost lightly, but she read the agony in his eyes, and clung to his arm and held it to her breast.

'This is like my will,' he said, 'the only one I shall make. There is May. I have not been fair, my dear. I have given her all my love—to your neglect. I have made her my idol, and—and—like her brother Morton, she is very weak. Such a pretty child, beautiful as an angel. Claire dearest, I loved her so well, and it has been my punishment for my injustice to you.'

'Dearest father!'

'Yes, I was unjust to you, but that is past. I pray your forgiveness, my child, as I say to you, I leave you the legacy of that boy and girl—that child-wife. Claire, you must forgive her, as I pray Him to forgive me. Ignore the past, Claire, my child, and in every way you can be ready to step between her and the evil that she goes too near. You will do this?'

‘ Oh, father, yes. But you? What shall I do now ?’

‘ Claire, only a few short weeks, and I shall be in my grave. Don’t start, my child. To you, in your sweet spring of life, it is the black pit of horror. To me, in the bitter winter of my life, there is no horror there : it is but the calm, silent resting-place where tired nature sleeps and life’s troubles end. There, there, my little one, to whose sweet virtues and truth I have been blind, I am almost content with my fate for the reason that you have awakened me from a trance into which I had fallen. Claire, my child, can you forgive this weak, vain, old man ?’

She leaned forward and kissed his white forehead, and, as he drew her closer to him, she nestled in his breast, and clung to him, sobbing convulsively.

‘ Hah !’ he sighed, ‘ I did not know I could be so happy again. Think of me as an innocent—an injured man, my child, as of one whose lips are sealed. Pray for me as I shall pray for you.’

‘ But, father, I may see Mr. Barclay ?’

He was silent for a few minutes.

‘ Yes,’ he said at last.

Claire uttered a sigh of relief.

‘ You shall ask him to come here. I will appeal to him to watch over you. He is rough, Claire, and his wife is vulgar—coarse ; but, God help me ! I wish I had had such a true and sterling heart. There, hush ! I have made my

will,' he said, smiling. 'It is done; I have but to seal it with my death, and I see its approach without a shade of fear.'

'But, father! my dearest father!'

'My own,' he said tenderly, as he kissed her and smiled down upon her. 'Ah! you do not shrink from me now. Sweet, true woman. Oh, that I could have been so blind! You were going to ask me something.'

'Yes, dearest,' she whispered; 'I want you to forgive——'

'May? Yes: she is forgiven. I forgive her, poor, weak child. Tell her that I had but tender words for her even now. I would send her messages, but of what avail would they be, even as the words of a dying man? No; she has not the stability. It is more her failing than her sin. You were asking me to forgive her.'

'I knew you forgave her, dearest, but I want you to forgive poor Fred.'

He started from her as if he had been stung.

'I saw him last night, and he begs and prays of you to forgive him and let him come. Father, he loves you in spite of all this estrangement.'

'Silence!' cried the old man furiously. 'Have I not said that I would not hear his name?'

'Father dearest, what have I done?' cried Claire, as she gazed in terror at the convulsed features, at the claw-like hands, extended, clutching, and opening and shutting as the old man gasped for air.

‘Father! Oh, help!’

A terrible purple colour suffused his face; his knotted veins started upon his temples, and it seemed as if he were about to fall in a fit; but the paroxysm began to pass away. He caught at Claire’s hand, and held by it while with his other he signed to her to be silent, for just then the clanking of bolts and locks was heard, and the door was thrown open to admit Richard Linnell and Mr. Barclay.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### UNDER BARCLAY'S SHELL.

DENVILLE grew composed at once, and taking Claire's hand, stood up facing his visitors with a slight trace of the old manner returning, as he bowed and pointed to the stool and bed.

'Poor accommodation for visitors, gentlemen,' he said; 'but it is the best I have to offer. Mr. Barclay, Mr. Linnell, will you be seated?'

'Couldn't get to you before, Denville,' said the money-lender, shaking hands warmly. 'Terrible business this. Miss Claire, my dear, the wife has gone to your house again. Taken some things with her; said she should stay.'

'Mr. Denville, I am truly grieved,' said Linnell, offering his hand, after giving Claire a grave, sad look. 'Mr. Barclay and I have come to see of what service we can be to you.'

'Yes, yes, of course, Denville,' cried Barclay briskly. 'Bad business, this, but—eh, Mr. Linnell?'

'Miss Denville,' said the latter, turning to Claire, 'as we

are about to discuss business matters about counsel and your father's defence, would you like to leave us ?'

'No,' said Denville quickly, as he drew Claire's hand through his arm, and shook his head. 'You will pardon me, gentlemen, but in the little space of time I am allowed to see visitors, I should like to keep my child by my side. Gentlemen—Mr. Barclay—Mr. Linnell—half an hour ago I said that I had no friends. I was wrong—I thank you for coming. God bless you !'

'Why, of course you had friends, Denville,' cried Barclay. 'You don't suppose because a man's hard and fast over money matters, that he has no bowels of compassion, do you ? But now, business. About counsel for your defence ?'

'I had already discussed the matter with my daughter, gentlemen. Counsel ! It is useless. I need none.'

'Need none, Mr. Denville ?' cried Linnell quickly. 'Pray think of what you are saying. You must have legal help.'

Claire darted a grateful look at Linnell, and then drew back with pain depicted in her countenance, mingled with pride and mortification as she saw the coldness in his manner towards her.

'I must repeat what I said, Mr. Linnell,' said Denville in a low, pained voice. 'I want no counsel. I will have none, but I thank you all the same, Mr. Barclay. Claire, my child, you will pardon me. I must speak with Mr. Barclay.'



Claire shrank into one corner of the cell, her brow drawn with the pain inflicted upon her as her father kept reverting to his old displays of deportment and mincing ways—ways that had become so habitual that even now, incongruous as they were, he could not quite throw them off.

‘You need not go, Mr. Linnell,’ he continued, ‘that is if you will bear with the pain of listening to a dying man’s request. We have never been friends, sir, but I am your debtor now for your kindly act. My dear Barclay, the little drama of my poor life is nearly over; the curtain is about to fall. You have known me long—my little ambitious hopes and disappointments. I cannot say to my child there is a home for her with her sister; will you help her when—you know what I would say?’

‘Denville, old fellow, I don’t know what to say to this,’ said Barclay quickly. ‘It’s a mystery to me. D—— it, sir, I can’t believe you killed that old woman even now. I want to get you counsel who will clear you, sir, and throw the deed on to whoever did it—some one unknown.’

‘Hush!—hush! Pray hush!’ cried Denville, shuddering. ‘We are wasting time. Barclay—my daughter.’

‘My dear old fellow,’ said the money-lender quickly, ‘I told you that my wife had gone on to your place to see Miss Claire there. Don’t you be afraid for her. She has a friend in Mrs. B. who will never fail her. Friend? She will prove a mother. Don’t you trouble about Miss Claire. There’s

only one obstacle to her having a happy home, and that's me, and——'

He stopped short, for his voice had turned husky, and gripping Denville's hand very tightly, he held it for a few minutes.

'God bless her sweet face!' he whispered; 'we never believed one of the miserable scandals about her, Denville. But now about yourself.'

Denville turned away his face, took a couple of steps to the side, and stood with his back to them for a few minutes. Then, turning, with his face wearing a curious look of calm, he laid his hand upon Barclay's arm.

'You have taken away the bitterness of death, Barclay,' he said in a low voice. 'Heaven help me for the weakest of men. I never knew who were my friends.'

'Then you will let us get counsel for you?'

'No, no! I forbid it,' said Denville sternly. 'Good-bye, Mr. Linnell. I thank you. Barclay, God bless you!'

His voice trembled as he pressed the money-lender's hand, for the gaoler had opened the door, and was waiting to usher them out.

'Claire, my child,' he whispered, taking her in his arms, 'you will come again. Good-bye now. Good-bye.'

She clung to him wildly for a few moments, and then, with a look of desolation in her eyes, slowly followed the gaoler and the other visitors along the echoing stone passages

to the gate, where Linnell laid his hand upon her arm.

Before he could speak there was a rustle of a silk dress, a hurried panting as some one brushed by him, and a voluble voice exclaimed :

‘ They wouldn’t let me in, my dear, and I’ve been waiting for you to come. There, there, there, you and May are coming home along with me, and——’

Her voice died away as Linnell stood there, feeling desolate and cold. There was an intense bitterness in his heart, as he told himself that his love for Claire was of a very poor type, that he had been ready to believe ill of her, and let that love become chilled. What had he done now that she was plunged into the very depths of despair? Almost held aloof when he would have given all he had—life itself—to save her from her pain.

‘ I am mad, jealous, weak, and contemptible,’ he cried to himself at last. ‘ I will go to her and tell her I love her more than ever. It is not too late.’

He had taken a step to follow, when a hand was laid upon his arm, and Barclay said huskily :

‘ There’s a woman for you, Mr. Linnell, sir. I often think she ought to have had a better husband. There, the best thing is to let them alone together. You wouldn’t think it, Mr. Linnell, with me, such a hard nut as I am, but this business has quit upset me. Good-day, sir, good-day.’

‘ Good-day, Mr. Barclay,’ said Linnell dreamily ; and they were parting, when Barclay said in a low quick whisper :

‘ You may think of some way of helping the old fellow, Mr. Linnell. If you do there’s any amount of money ready for the lawyers, if you give me a hint. For he’s an innocent man, sir. Kill that old woman? Pho! Pooh! Stuff! He couldn’t kill a cat!’

## CHAPTER XIV.

### FRED DENVILLE FORWARD.

‘WHAT do you say, my dear—another of those mad fits of excitement as soon as my name’s mentioned? Oh, it’s too bad. I don’t think I’ve ever been rake enough to deserve it. Well, whether or no, I must go and see him. I can’t stop away. I’m his eldest son, and a man’s a man even if he is a common soldier, and has disgraced himself in the eyes of society.’

‘Fred dear, I’m broken-hearted,’ sobbed Claire, as she nestled close to her brother, and hid her face in his breast, neither seeing nor hearing Mr. and Mrs. Barclay open the door and cross the room, the latter making a sign to the dragoon not to take any notice of them, and as soon as she was alone with her husband, saying indignantly :

‘The scandalous old hags, making out that the poor dear was carrying on with a common soldier. Lor’! Jo-si-ah, what a little wickedness there would seem to be in the world if everything was properly explained.’

‘Well, I don’t know so much about that,’ replied Barclay.

‘Perhaps we should find out some of the very innocent ones were not so good as they seemed.’

‘I shall go on at once and see the old man,’ said Fred Denville, kissing his sister tenderly. ‘I can’t stop away. The old fellow will be calmer perhaps to-day; and, Claire, my girl, I’m going to try and get my discharge, and start a new life. It’s a strange thing if I can’t keep a home for you and take care of you. I can’t stand this soldiering any longer. Servant to that blackguard, Rockley! Has he spoken to you lately?’

‘No, Fred,’ said Claire wearily. ‘No.’

‘I can’t stand it, girl. It’s a shame to talk of my beggarly troubles now, but it’s precious hard to be meeting one’s own brother—one’s superior officer—and him not to know me. Has Morton been to see father?’

‘N-no, dear; not yet.’

‘Curse him!’

‘Fred!—dear Fred!’

‘Well, no, I won’t curse him. It’s the boy’s training, not his nature. He ought not to cut the poor old man, though, in his disgrace. Claire, d—— it all; I don’t believe father killed that old thing.’

He looked at his sister with a quick intelligent gaze, full of conviction; but as he met her full in the eyes, and saw the change that came over her countenance, the conviction seemed blunted, and he shuddered.

‘She believes it!’ he muttered. Then aloud: ‘Why, Claire!’

‘Hush—don’t—don’t speak to me—don’t say anything,’ she panted. ‘Fred, shall I be dragged before the judge and be forced to answer questions—horrible questions?’

He was silent.

‘You believe I shall. You think I shall,’ she panted. ‘Oh, Fred, Fred, I would sooner die.’

He drew a long breath, and looked at her in a horrified way, while she seemed to be growing wild with dread.

‘I could not bear it,’ she cried, ‘to go up before those people and condemn my own father. It would be too horrible. It would be against nature. I could not, I would not speak.’

‘Hush, little sister,’ said Fred tenderly. ‘You are growing wild. Perhaps you will not have to go. Perhaps they will find out the right man before the time—hush!—hush!’

Claire had uttered a piteous cry full of despair, as she buried her face in her hands.

‘I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it,’ she cried. ‘There, go—go and see him,’ she said quickly. ‘You must go. It would be too cruel to stay away from him now he is so low in spirit. Be gentle with him, Fred, if he says hard things to you; and pray—pray don’t resent them. You will bear everything for my sake—say that you will.’

‘Of course, of course.’



‘Trouble and misery have made him irritable, and so that he hardly knows what he says at times.’

‘Poor old fellow!’ said the dragoon sadly. ‘Ah, Claire, my little girl, it did not want this trouble in our unhappy home.’

He kissed her very tenderly, and then, as if moved by some sudden impulse, he took her in his arms again and held her to his breast, whilst she clung to him as if he were her only hope, and so they remained in silence for a time.

At last he loosed himself from her embrace, and stood over her as she crouched down upon the sofa.

‘I’m going there now, Claire,’ he said, ‘but before I go, have you anything to say to me about that night of the murder? Is there anything I ought to know, so as to be able to talk to the old man about his defence? Will he tell me all he knows about the affair—why, Claire, child, what is the matter—are you going wild?’

He caught her two hands, and held her, startled by the change which had come over her, as she shrank from him in horror, with eyes dilated, face drawn and lips apart.

‘There, my little girl,’ he said, with rough tenderness, ‘I ought to have known better than to talk to you about it. Perhaps all will come right yet after all.’

Claire seemed to be so prostrated that it was some time before he attempted to leave her, and then it was upon her

urging, for she seemed at last to rouse herself to action, and with feverish haste bade him go.

‘It is your duty, Fred,’ she said agitatedly, ‘but—but don’t question him—don’t say a word to him. Only go to him as the son to the father in terrible distress. Let him speak to you if he will.’

‘But his defence, girl, his defence. Something must be done, and I am without a guinea in the world.’

‘Mr. Barclay—Mr. Linnell are arranging that without his knowledge,’ said Claire. ‘I had forgotten to tell you, Fred: my head seems confused and strange.’

‘No wonder, little one,’ he said. ‘Ah, I like that Barclay. One never knows who are our friends until trouble comes—and young Linnell. It isn’t a time to talk about such things now, Clairey; but young Linnell’s a good fellow, and he thinks a great deal of you.’

Claire joined her hands as if begging him to be silent, and he once more kissed her, and after begging Mrs. Barclay to watch over her, hurried away.

## CHAPTER XV.

### FATHER AND SON.

JAMES BELL, dragoon, otherwise Fred Denville, the disgraced prodigal of the Master of the Ceremonies' home, had a couple of shillings in his pocket as he strode towards the prison; and as he was on his way, low-spirited and despondent at the troubles of his house, a great thirst came upon him, and he felt that he could never go through the scene he had to encounter without a stimulant in some form.

Then he thought of what a curse drink was to him, and how he could not take one glass without wanting another, and many others, and with this thought he manfully passed the first public-house.

But, as he passed, the door was swung open, and the hot, spiritous odour of strong drinks floated out and half maddened him.

'Just one glass would tighten me up,' he muttered, 'and I could go through with it better.'

He thought of his last interview with his father, their

struggle, and how he had nearly struck him, and he shrank from what was to come.

‘I can’t help it,’ he said. ‘I must have a drop. It will steady a fellow’s nerves. Good God! how horrible to go and see that old man charged with murder.’

He had thought a great deal about it before, but now the whole affair struck him as if in a new light, and the examinations, the trial, and the following of that trial came upon him with a terrible force that frightened him. It had never seemed so horrible before, and he burst out in a cold perspiration as in imagination he saw the white bared head of the old man, with wild eyes and ghastly face—saw him in the grey of some chilly morning, pinioned and with the white-robed priest by his side, walking towards——

It was too horrible! A curious feeling of blind terror made him shiver and hurry on, as something seemed to whisper in his ear, ‘He did murder that wretched old woman, and he must suffer for his crime.’

‘Curse me, I must have some brandy, or I shall never be able to face him,’ he gasped, as he strode on, no longer the stern, upright, well-built cavalry soldier, but a bent, trembling man, at whom more than one passer-by looked askance. He even reeled, and albeit perfectly sober, he evoked comments upon ‘these drunken soldiers’ in the streets.

‘It is too horrible,’ he said again. ‘I never saw it like

this before ;' and, hurrying on with unsteady step, he was making straight for a public-house he knew, when, on turning a corner, he suddenly encountered Major Rockley.

The meeting was so sudden that he had passed him before he remembered his duty to salute his superior ; but the encounter brought with it a flood of recollections of the night of Mrs. Pontardent's party, and the remembrance of his helplessness, and of the pangs he had suffered as he awoke to the fact, as he believed, that the sister he almost worshipped was in the power of a relentless scoundrel. This cleared the mental fumes that were obscuring his intellect, and, drawing himself up, he strode on straight past the public-house door and on to the prison gates.

'It's time I acted like a man,' he said to himself, 'and not like a cowardly brute.'

He was provided with a pass, and, in ignorance of the fact that Rockley had turned and was watching him, following him, and standing at a distance till he saw him enter the gates, he rang, presented his paper, and was ushered along the blank stone passages of the prison till he reached the cell door.

'One minute,' whispered Fred, wiping the drops from his forehead, as a sudden trembling fit came over him. Then, mastering it, and drawing himself up, he breathed heavily and nodded to the gaoler.

'I'm ready,' he said hoarsely : 'open.'

The next minute he was standing in the whitewashed cell with the door closed behind him, locked in with the prisoner and half choked with emotion, gazing down at the bent grey head.

For the Master of Ceremonies was seated upon a low stool, his arms resting upon his knees, and his hands clasped between them, probably asleep. He had not heard the opening and closing of the door, and if not asleep, was so deaf to all but his own misery that Fred Denville felt that he must go and touch him before he would move.

The young man's breast swelled, and there was a catching in his breath as he looked down upon the crushed, despondent figure, and thought of the change that had taken place. The light from the barred window streamed down upon him alone, leaving the rest of the cell in shadow ; and as Fred Denville gazed, he saw again the overdressed leader of the fashionable visitors mincing along the Parade, cane in one hand, snuff-box in the other, and the box changed to the hand holding the cane while a few specks of snuff were brushed from the lace of his shirt-front.

Then he looked back farther, and seemed to see the tall, important, aristocratic-looking gentleman, to whom people of quality talked, and of whom he always stood in such awe ; and now, with this came the recollection of his boyish wonder how it was that his father should be so grand a man



abroad while everything was so pinched and miserable at home.

Back flitted his thoughts as he stood there, looking down at the motionless figure, to the encounter when he had been surprised by his father with Claire. The terrible rage; the fit; the horrible hatred and dislike the old man had shown, and the unforgiving rancour he had displayed.

Fred Denville sighed as it all came back, but he felt no resentment now, for his breast was full of memories of acts of kindness that had been shown him as a boy, before he grew wild and resisted the paternal hand, preferring the reckless soldier's life to the irksome poverty and pretence of the place-seeker's home and its pinching and shams.

'Poor old dad!' he said to himself, as the tears stood in his eyes; 'he is brought very low. Misery makes friends. God help him now!'

The stalwart dragoon, moved by his emotion, took a couple of quick steps forward and went down upon one knee by the old man's side, took his hands gently in both of his own, and held them in a firm, strong clasp, as he uttered the one word—

'Father!'

The touch and the voice seemed to galvanize the prisoner, who started upright, gazing wildly at his son, and then shrank back against the wall with his hands outstretched to keep him off.



There was a terrible silence for a space, during which Fred Denville remained upon his knee, then slowly joining his hands as he looked pleadingly in his father's face, he said slowly :

‘ Yes, I know I have been a bad son ; I have disgraced you. But, father, can you not forgive me now ?’

The old man did not speak, but shrank against the wall, looking upon him with loathing.

‘ Father,’ said Fred again, ‘ you are in such trouble. It is so dreadful. I could not stay away. Let us be friends once more, and let me help you. I will try so hard. I am your son.’

Again there was that terrible silence, during which the old man seemed to be gathering force, and the look of horror and loathing intensified as he glared at the man humbling himself there upon his knee.

‘ Do you not hear me ?’ cried Fred, piteously. ‘ Father : I am your son.’

‘ No !’ exclaimed Denville, in a low, hoarse whisper that was terrible in its intensity. ‘ No : you are no son of mine. Hypocrite, villain—how dare you come here to insult me in my misery ?’

‘ Insult you, father !’ said Fred softly. ‘ No, no, you do not know me. You do not understand what brings me here.’

‘ Not know ?—not understand ?’ panted Denville, still in the same hoarse whisper, as if he dreaded to be heard. ‘ I

tell you I know all—— I saw all. It was what I might have expected from your career.'

'Father!'

'Silence, dog! Oh, that I had strength! I feel that as I gave you the life you dishonour, I should be doing a duty to take you by the throat, and crush it out from such a wretch.'

'He's mad,' thought the young man as he gazed on the wild distorted face.

'You thought that you were unseen—that your crime was known but to yourself; but such things cannot be hidden, such horrors are certain to be known. And now, wretch, hypocrite, coward, you have brought me to this, and you come with your pitiful canting words to ask me for pardon—me, the miserable old man whom you have dragged down even to this—a felon's cell from which I must go to the scaffold.'

'No—no, father,' panted Fred. 'Don't—for God's sake, don't talk like this. I've been a great blackguard—a bad son; but surely you might forgive me—your own flesh and blood, when I come to you on my knees, in sorrow and repentance, to ask forgiveness, and to say let me try and help you in your distress. Come, father—my dear old father—give me your hand once more. Let the past be dead, for Claire's sake, I ask you. I am her brother—your boy.'

'Silence! Wretch!' cried the old man. 'Leave this

place. Let me at least die in peace, and not be defiled by the presence of such a loathsome, cowardly thing as you.'

'And you,' said Fred softly, as he held out his hands; 'you, I can remember it well, used to hold these hands together, father, and teach me to say, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us." Father, have I sinned so deeply as all this?'

'Sinned!' cried the old man starting forward, and catching his son by the throat. 'Sinned? Blasphemer! coward! hypocrite! You dare to say this to me! Go, before I try to strangle you, for I cannot contain myself when you are here.'

'Father!' cried Fred, kneeling unresisting as the old man clasped him tightly by the throat, 'are you mad?'

'Would to God I were before I had lived to see this day,' cried Denville, still in the same hoarse whisper. 'But go—I have done ill enough in my wretched life without adding murder to the wrong. Go, and coward that you are, escape to some far-off land where your crime is not known, and there try and repent, if you can. No, there can be no repentance for the coward who destroys one wretched, helpless life, and then to save his own worthless body—he can have no soul—sends his poor, worn-out, broken father to the scaffold.'

Fred did not move, but gazed pityingly in his father's face.

‘You cannot be a man,’ continued Denville, ‘a man as other men. You do not speak—you do not speak. Fool! Murderer! Do you think that your crime was not known?’

Fred still remained silent, gazing in the convulsed face, with the veins in the temples throbbing, the eyes glaring wildly, and the grey hairs seeming to rise and move.

‘Speak, since you have forced it upon me, though I would have gone to the scaffold without a word, praying that my sacrifice might expiate my own child’s crime. Speak, I say: do you still think it was not known?’

Fred Denville remained upon his knees, but neither spoke nor resisted.

‘I tell you that when I awoke to the horrors of that night, I said to myself, “He is my own son—my own flesh and blood—I cannot speak. I will not speak. I will bear it.” And I have borne it—in silence. Wretch that you are—listen. I have, to screen you, borne all with my lips sealed, and let that sweet, pure-hearted girl shrink from me, believing—God help me!—that mine was the hand that crushed out yon poor old creature’s life.’

‘Father, you are raving,’ cried Fred hoarsely.

‘Raving! It is true. Claire, my own darling, has gone, too, with sealed lips, loathing me, and only out of pity and belief in her duty as a child borne with my presence—poor sweet suffering saint—believing me a murderer, and I dare not tell her I was innocent, and that it was the brother she

loved, who had come in the night, serpent-like, to the room he knew so well, to murder, and to steal those wretched bits of glittering glass.'

'My dear father!'

'Silence, wretch!' cried Denville. 'I tell you, knowing all, I said that I could not speak, for I was only a broken old man, and that my son might repent; that I could not condemn him and be his judge. And, my God! it has come to this! I have borne all. I have suffered maddening agony as I have seen the loathing in my poor child's eyes. I have borne all uncomplaining, and when, as I dreaded, the exposure came, I uncomplainingly suffered myself to be taken, and I will go to the scaffold and die, a victim—an innocent victim for you, so that you may live; but let me die in peace. Free me from your presence, and I will wait till, in a better world, my darling can come and say, "Forgive me, father; I was blind."'

'Heaven help me! What shall I say?' muttered Fred. 'Poor old fellow! It has turned his brain.'

The old man was in the act of throwing him off and shrinking from him when Fred caught his hands.

'My dear old father,' he said tenderly, 'neither Claire nor I believe that you could commit this terrible crime. You must be cleared from all suspicion, and—come—come—let us be friends. You will forgive me, father—all the past?'

'Forgive you? No, I cannot. It is impossible. I have

tried. Sitting here alone in this awful silence, with the shadow of the gallows falling across me, I have tried, but it is impossible. I will suffer for your crime. I have told you that I will, but upon one condition, that you never go near Claire again. She thinks me guilty, but she has fought hard and striven to forgive me. Do not pollute her with your presence, but go far away from here. Go at once, lest in the weakness of my nature I should be tempted to try and save myself from death by confessing all.'

'Heaven help me!' said Fred again; 'he is mad.'

He had spoken aloud, shaping his thoughts unconsciously, and the old man took up his words.

'God help me! I wish I were,' he said pitifully, 'for the mad must be free from the agony which I have to bear.'

Fred rose to his feet and looked at the old man aghast. Then, as if for the first time, he seemed to realize that his father was not wandering in his mind, and clasping the thin arms tightly, he pressed him back into a sitting position upon the bed, bending over him, and, in his great strength, holding him helplessly there, as he said quickly, and with a fierce ring in his voice:

'Why, father, do you know what you are saying? You do not think I killed Lady Teigne?'

'Hypocrite!' cried the old man fiercely.

'Speak out, man!' cried Fred, as fiercely now. 'What



do you mean? How dare you charge me with such a crime !'

'Hypocrite !' panted the old man again. 'You cannot shield yourself now. It is a punishment for my weakness that day—that night. I would not have done it,' he cried wildly, 'but I was at my last gasp for money. Everything was against me. I had not a shilling, and there all that day the devil was dancing the jewels of that miserable old woman before my eyes.'

'Father !' cried Fred, 'for God's sake, don't tell me you killed her—for God's sake don't. No, no ; it is not true.'

'Silence ! hypocrite ! murderer !' cried the old man. 'Listen. I tell you that all that day the devil was dancing those diamonds before my eyes. I saw them in the glittering waters of the sea. I turned to Claire, and her eyes shone like diamonds. The night came, and the sky was all studded with gems, and they were sparkling and reflected in the water. Diamonds—always diamonds ; and above stairs, in that room, a casket with necklet and bracelets, all diamonds, and the devil always whispering in my ear that I had but to get two or three taken out and replaced with paste, while I pledged the real stones for a few months, and redeemed them as soon as I could turn myself round. Do you hear me ?'

'Yes, I hear you,' said Fred, with a strange look of horror intensifying in his face.



‘I fought against the temptation. I struggled with it, as I said that I had always been a weak, foolish fashion-seeker, but an honest gentleman. I swore that I would not defile myself by such a crime; but there were my bills; there was the demand for money for a score of pressing necessities, and the fiend whispered to me that it would not be a crime, only taking them from that miserable old worldly creature as a loan.’

‘Go on,’ said Fred hoarsely; ‘go on.’ And he stared with horror in the old man’s upturned face.

‘Then the night came, and my children went to their beds innocent of the agony I suffered, for there was the temptation stronger than before. I went to my room, and looked out. The sea and sky were all diamonds; and I tore back the blind, and I said that I must have two or three of the wretched stones—that I would have them—borrow them for a time, and be free.’

‘Oh, father, father!’ groaned Fred; and Denville went on excitedly.

‘I said I would have them, and I waited till it would be safe to go. I knew that the old woman would have taken her sleeping-draught, and that it would be easy enough to go in and get her keys—I knew where she kept them—take out the diamond cross, get the stones changed, and replace it before she would miss it the next afternoon.’

Fred groaned, and the old man went on, clutching him

now by the arm as he spoke, gazing fiercely in his eyes the while.

‘I waited till all were sleeping, and the time seemed to have come, and then, like a thief, I stole out of my room and along the passage, till I was outside the door where the old woman—poor old wreck of a woman—lay. It was only to borrow those diamonds for a time, and I meant to replace them, though I knew that I was little better than a thief—a cold-blooded, treacherous thief—to deal thus with the woman who trusted to my honour for her safety. But I was so sorely pressed for money, I said to myself; and keeping my creditors quiet meant placing Morton and Claire both well in life, and then my troubles would cease. Do you hear me?’

‘Yes—I hear,’ groaned Fred.

‘I stood there on the mat outside her door thinking that, and that it would be for Claire’s sake; and as I thought that, I saw her sweet, pure face before me, as it were, her eyes looking into mine; and I said: “How can I ever look into those eyes openly again?” I felt that I was still a gentleman, but that in a few minutes I should be a despicable thief. Then I raised my hand to open the door, always unfastened so that Claire might go in and out, but it dropped to my side, and I sank upon my knees and prayed for strength to resist temptation, and the strength I asked was given.’

The old man paused, for there was a step outside in the stone passage, and it seemed that the gaoler was coming there ; but he passed on, and Denville gripped his son's arm more tightly.

‘ I don't know how long I knelt there, but I was rising with the temptation crushed, and as I rose I was going back to my room.’

‘ Hah !’ ejaculated Fred excitedly, and he breathed more freely.

‘ Back to my room, boy, when I seemed to be roused from the stupor brought on by my agony of mind, for there was a sound in the countess's chamber. I listened, and there it was again. It was a confused sound, as if she were moving in her bed, and I thought she must be ill, and want Claire. I was about to go and rouse her, when there were other sounds ; there was a loud crash, and I stood as if turned to ice.’

‘ You heard sounds !’ gasped Fred ; and he looked horror-stricken and shrinking as his father seemed to grow in strength.

‘ Yes,’ whispered the old man fiercely, as he seemed to fix Fred Denville with his eye ; ‘ I heard sounds that froze me with horror, as I felt that my temptation had been in the shape of a warning of evil, and that another was at work in the poor old woman's room. For a few minutes I could not stir. Then, mastering my horror and fear, and calling

myself coward, I hurried into the room, to find myself face to face with him who had entered before. I saw all at a glance, as a hoarse groan came from the bed—the curtain torn aside, and the murderer by the dressing-table, with the jewel-casket in his hand.’

‘You saw all this?’ cried Fred, white as ashes now. ‘Father, you saw this?’

‘Everything, as I dashed—old weak man as I was—at the wretch who had done this thing. It was only a momentary struggle, and I was thrown down, and saw him dart to the folding-doors and pass through. I staggered after him in time to hear him overturn a pot or two in the verandah, as he swung himself over and slid down the pillar. Then I was alone panting there in that chamber of death; for as I took the candle from the little stand, and drew aside the curtain, it was to gaze down upon the starting eyes of the strangled woman—dead in my house, under the protection of my roof; and, with the horrible thought upon me that only a brief while back I was nearly entering that chamber to play the part of thief, I gave no alarm, but shrank towards the door, and stole out trembling, bathed with sweat, to get back to my room, and try to think out what I should do.’

Fred Denville groaned, and the old man’s breath went and came with the sound of one who has been hunted till he stands at bay.

‘I had not been there a minute before I heard steps ; a light shone beneath my door, and I sat trembling, utterly prostrated, for I knew that it was Claire who had been alarmed. I wanted to go out and stop her, to set her on her guard ; but I sat there as if suffering from nightmare, unable to move, even when she came at last and summoned me ; and, like one in a dream, I listened to what she had to say, and followed her to the murdered woman’s room. I could not stay her ; I could do nothing. I dared not give the alarm ; I dared not speak, but went with her, and saw all again in a dazed, confused way, till I noticed something on the floor, which I snatched up and hid from Claire ; and then the confusion was gone—driven away by the agony I felt. My God, what agony, as I read in Claire’s eyes that she believed I had done that deed !’

‘She believed this of you ?’

‘Yes ; and believes it still,’ groaned the prisoner.

‘But — but,’ cried Fred excitedly, ‘what was it you snatched from the floor ?’

‘A knife ; a knife I knew. One that I had seen before.’

‘But the murderer—you saw him ?’

‘Plainly as I see you.’

‘But you did not summon help.’

‘I could not.’

‘I knew you were innocent,’ cried Fred excitedly. ‘I swore you were.’

‘I am,’ said the old man coldly.

‘Should you know the wretch again?’ panted Fred.

‘Yes; too well.’

‘But you did not say this at the inquest.’

‘My lips were closed.’

‘But, father, you do not——’

‘Silence, hypocrite! Enough of this. I could not speak. I dare not tell the world the murderer was my own son.’

Fred Denville drew himself erect. His father rose from the bed, and the two men stood gazing for some minutes in each other’s eyes without a word.

It was the Master of the Ceremonies who broke the spell.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘I have spoken. It is enough. Your secret is safe with me. Go. Repent, but do not ask me to forgive you. Ask that of Heaven. I am old and broken, and can die.’

‘But, father!’ groaned Fred wildly, ‘it was not I.’

‘It was my eldest son. I saw him as he struggled with me—in his uniform, and I picked up afterwards from the floor his knife—his pocket-knife that had been used to wrench open the casket of jewels. The knife with “R. M.” on the handle. It was given to my son by the fisherman, Miggles.’

‘Yes, Dick gave me that knife years ago,’ said Fred, speaking like one who has received a tremendous blow. ‘I have not seen it since that night.’



‘No,’ said the old man bitterly; ‘it lies far out beyond the end of the pier, buried deep in sand by now.’

Fred Denville stood holding his hands pressed to his head, staring straight before him at the whitewashed wall, while neither spoke.

The silence was broken by the rattling of bolts and the turning of a key, when the gaoler threw open the door, and, without a word, the dragoon walked, or rather reeled, from the cell, as if he had taken strong drink till his senses were nearly gone.



## CHAPTER XVI.

### BLOW FOR BLOW.

FRED DENVILLE went straight to Barclay's, and was admitted, Claire looking at him reproachfully as he threw himself into a chair.

'Oh, Fred!' she cried, 'and at such a time!'

'Not been drinking,' he said; 'not been drinking. How's May?'

'Very ill, dear,' said Claire sadly.

'Here?'

'Yes, Mrs. Barclay insisted upon her being brought, so that we could be together.'

'God bless her,' said Fred softly. Then, after a pause—  
'I've seen the old man.'

'And you are friends, Fred?'

He shook his head, and sat staring down at the carpet.

'But you tried to be, dear?'

'Yes; tried hard. I've been. I've done my duty—for once,' he said with a strange laugh.

He did not speak again for a few minutes, and Claire sat holding his hand, looking at him doubtingly, his manner was so strange.

‘You think I’ve been drinking,’ he cried fiercely. ‘Give a dog a bad name, and then hang him. I haven’t touched a drop to-day.’

He changed his manner to her directly, and his voice was low and tender as he took her to his breast and kissed her.

‘Poor little Clairry,’ he said; ‘you’ve had a rough time. Never mind; brighter days coming. The old man will be found innocent.’

‘Innocent, Fred?’ she faltered.

‘Yes, innocent,’ he cried. ‘Wait: you will see. Clairry, look here. Tell me this. Did I ever talk about Lady Teigne’s jewels when I came to see you?’

‘I don’t know, dear. Yes, I remember now, I think you did.’

‘Hah!’ he ejaculated. ‘I must go now. Good-bye, little woman. I always loved my little sister, always. You know that, don’t you, Clairry?’

‘Yes, dear Fred, always.’

‘Bad as I was?’

‘Oh, Fred, I never thought you bad,’ cried Claire piteously. ‘I only thought it was a pity you did not try to raise yourself, and——’

‘Leave the drink alone. Quite right, Clairry. It was the

drink. It makes a man stupid and mad. He doesn't know what he's about when he has taken too much. Remember that, my dear, it was the drink.'

'Fred, how strangely you are talking.'

'Strangely?' he said, clasping her to his breast, 'strangely? Well, I meant to be kind and tender to my poor, suffering little sister. I've been a bad lot, but I always loved my little Claire.'

She stood gazing wonderingly after him, he seemed so strange in his way, as, after straining her to his breast, he kissed her passionately again and again, and then turned and literally ran from the room, while, as she placed her hand against her face, she found that it was wet.

'Poor Fred,' she said, 'if I could only win him from his ways.'

She said no more, for her thoughts were only too ready to turn to their usual theme—her father and his imprisonment, and she sat down to rest her aching head upon her hand, wondering what had passed during the interview within the prison walls.

Fred Denville found Mr. and Mrs. Barclay below, and in a quick, agitated way he caught Mrs. Barclay's hand.

'It's very kind of you to let me call upon my sister,' he said, 'seeing what I am. I thank you. I am not coming again.'

'Not coming again? Oh, I'm sure you're welcome enough,

Mr. Fred, for your sister's sake,' said Mrs. Barclay, 'isn't he, Jo-si-ah?'

'Of course, of course.'

'Thank you—both of you,' cried Fred hastily. 'You are very good, and that's why I say be kind to my poor sisters, and try and comfort both if anything happens.'

'Oh, but we must not let anything happen,' said Barclay. 'The poor old gentleman must be saved.'

'Yes, of course,' said Fred dreamily; 'he must be saved. He's innocent enough, poor old fellow. I did not mean that. You'll take care of the poor girls, won't you?'

'Why, of course we will, Mr. Fred Denville; of course we will. There, don't you make yourself uneasy about them.'

'I won't,' said Fred, in his bluff, straightforward way. 'I may be quite happy, then, about Claire?'

'To be sure you may.'

'I shouldn't like her to suffer any more, and it would be terrible for those wretched dandy scoundrels to get hold of her and break her heart.'

'Don't you fidget yourself about that, young man,' said Mrs. Barclay with quite a snort. 'Your dear sister's too proud for any jack-a-dandy fellow to win her heart.'

'You're a good woman,' said Fred softly. 'I'm not much account as a man, but I know a good woman when I meet one, and I wish I'd had such a one as you by me when I

was a boy. If I had, I shouldn't have been a common soldier now. Good-bye, ma'am ; good-bye, sir. Heaven bless you both.'

He hurried out, afraid of showing his emotion, and Mrs. Barclay turned round wiping her eyes.

'There, Jo-si-ah, you see everybody don't think ill of us, bad as we are.'

'Humph! no,' said Barclay thoughtfully; 'but I don't understand that chap—he's so strange. Why, surely, old girl, he had no hand in that murder.'

'Lor! Jo-si-ah, don't! You give me the creeps all over. I do wish you wouldn't think about murders and that sort of thing. You give me quite a turn. I wouldn't have my dear Claire hear you for the world.'

'All right! I won't say anything before her; but this young chap has set me thinking; he seemed so strange.'

Other people thought Fred Denville strange, notably Major Rockley, who, in company with Sir Matthew Bray and Sir Harry Payne, was on the Parade, as, with brows knit and eyes bent down, the dragoon came along, walking swiftly.

The three officers were in undress uniform, having just left parade, and each carried his riding-whip.

Fred did not notice them, he was too deep in thought, and walking straight on he went right between them, unintentionally giving Sir Matthew Bray a rough thrust with his

shoulder, for of course an officer could not give way to a private.

It was Fred Denville's duty, in the character of James Bell, private dragoon, to have saluted his officers and given them all the path, if necessary; but at that moment he could see nothing but the grey white-faced old man in the cell at the gaol, in peril of his life and threatened with a felon's death.

'I must have been drunk,' he was muttering to himself. 'Yes: I remember, I was horribly drunk that night, and didn't know what I was doing. Poor old father! with all your faults you did not deserve this. Yes: I must have been drunk.'

At this point he was brought from his musings to the present by a stinging cut from a riding-whip across the back, his tight uniform being so little protection that the sharp whalebone seemed to divide the flesh.

With a cry of rage he turned round, and flung out his fist, striking Sir Harry Payne, who had given the blow with the whip, full on the nose, and sending him backwards.

'You insolent dog!'

'You scoundrel!'

The epithets were delivered in a breath by Major Rockley and Sir Matthew Bray, just as Lord Carboro' approached, walking by Lady Drelinecourt's bath-chair.

It was an opportunity for showing how an insolent drunken



private should be treated ; and as several loungers of society were coming up, the two officers accompanied their words with a couple of blows from their whips.

It is dangerous to play with edged tools, is proverbially said ; and, in his then frame of mind, Fred Denville felt no longer that he was James Bell, the disciplined, kept-down servant and private. He felt as a man smarting from the blows he had received. The service, the penalty for striking an officer, were as nothing to him then ; he saw only the big, pompous, insolent bully of his regiment, Sir Matthew Bray, and the man who had insulted him a thousand times, which he could have forgiven, and his sister again and again, which he could not forgive.

With one bound he was upon Sir Matthew Bray, whom he struck full in the chest, so that he staggered back, tripped his heels on the front wheel of Lady Drelincourt's bath-chair, and fell heavily into the road.

With another bound he was upon Rockley, who had followed and struck him again a sharp, stinging cut.

There was a momentary struggle, and then the whip was twisted out of Rockley's hand, his wrist half dislocated, and for a couple of minutes the thin scourge hissed and whistled through the air as, half mad with rage, Fred lashed the Major across shoulders, back, and legs, and finally dashed him down with a parting cut across the face.



‘That for you, you horsewhipped cur and scoundrel! You disgrace the uniform you wear!’

There was a little crowd gathering, but only one man dared to seize upon the fierce-looking dragoon, and that one was Lord Carboro’.

‘Loose my arm,’ roared Fred, turning upon him with up-lifted whip; but, as he saw who held him, and that Bray and Payne were holding aloof, and helping Rockley to rise, he lowered his whip. ‘Loose my arm, my lord; you’re an old man, I can’t strive with you.’

‘You rascal! You have struck your superior officers.’

‘Superior!’ raged out Fred. ‘I have horsewhipped a vile *roué* for the blow he struck me, and ten times as much for—— Keep off!’ he roared, as Colonel Mellersh and Linnell joined the group.

‘I shall hold you till a picket comes from the barracks, sir, to take you in arrest,’ cried Lord Carboro’ sternly.

Fred Denville did not attempt to wrest his arm away, but smiled half contemptuously at the padded, made-up old nobleman, and gave the whip a lash through the air as he stared hard at Rockley, who was white with rage, but talked to him who held his arm.

‘Look here, my lord,’ he said, ‘is it amongst your set a social sin for a man to horsewhip the blackguard who insults his sister?’

‘No,’ said Lord Carboro’ stoutly; ‘but you have struck your superior officer.’

‘I have thrashed the scoundrel who would have dragged my sister in the mire could he have had his way. It was my last act as a free man, and thank God I have had the chance.’

‘James Bell,’ cried Sir Matthew Bray, ‘I arrest you. Give up that whip.’

‘Touch me if you dare,’ roared Fred. ‘Stand back, or I’ll kill you.’

‘Private Bell——’

‘D—— Private Bell!’ cried the young man fiercely. ‘My name is Frederick Denville, and I am a gentleman.’

Lord Carboro’s hand dropped to his side, and as the young man faced him for a moment, it was anything but anger that flashed from the old nobleman’s eyes as he muttered to himself:

‘Damme, so he is; and he has Claire’s very look.’

Fred Denville strode right away along the Parade, followed at a distance by Linnell and Mellersh, till, to their surprise, they saw him enter their door, no attempt being made to arrest him then.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### ‘SURRENDER!’

‘No, Mr. Denville, I am a soldier, and yours is a terrible crime against discipline, but I can’t say a word in condemnation of your act.’

‘Thank you, Colonel. Will you give me a few words here with Mr. Linnell?’

‘Yes; but I should advise you to be quick,’ said Mellersh. ‘Hang it, man, they’ll shoot you for this. What’s to be done, Dick? Look here, Denville, can’t you knock one of us down, take a suit of plain clothes and make off. There’s twenty pounds on the chimney-piece yonder.’

‘Thank you, sir, thank you,’ said Fred, smiling sadly; ‘but I’m not going to run. I shall give myself up.’

‘No, no,’ cried Linnell excitedly. ‘For heaven’s sake don’t do that, man. There’s trouble enough in your home. You’ll break her heart.’

Fred Denville swung round in an instant, and caught Linnell’s hands in a strong grip.

‘Then you do love her,’ he cried, his voice quivering. ‘My little true-hearted, suffering darling. Oh, man, man, man,

don't let wretched shadows stand between you now. I know everything, and how you have been ready to believe all kinds of unhappy scandals about the best girl who ever lived. Look here—no, don't go, Colonel; you've heard the beginning, you may as well hear the rest. It came out like a flash. Stop now, and hear me, both of you. Ours is an unhappy family; I've been a wild, foolish scamp: my father lies in prison under a false charge; he is innocent. I know that such a family is not one that a gentleman would seek to enter, save under exceptional circumstances; but I've watched you, Richard Linnell, and I know you loved my sister, and I know that she never had a thought save for you.'

Linnell clenched his hands, compressed his lips, and began to pace the room.

'You, Colonel Mellersh, are a bit of a cynic; you don't believe in women, but you are mistaken here.'

'What do you wish me to do?' said Linnell hoarsely.

'To do? She is almost friendless, broken-hearted, and has not a strong true hand to take hers, a loyal heart who will stand by her against the world. Richard Linnell, my poor sister is suffering and in pain, and a great trouble is coming upon her that will not balance the joyful news she will soon hear.'

'Then, why not make a dash for it, man, while you have time?' cried Mellersh.

'Because I shall give myself up to the civil authorities, sir; that is all. Mr. Linnell, remember what I have said. Good-bye.'

‘Too late!’ cried Mellersh, as a tramping was heard, and Sir Matthew Bray, a sergeant, and half a dozen dragoons marched quickly up.

Fred Denville’s whole manner had changed.

He dashed to the front. There was no escape there, and the soldiers were already in the hall.

Rushing to the back window he threw it up, but it moved stiffly, and before he had it well raised, the picket was in the room.

‘Surrender!’ cried the sergeant. ‘Halt, or I fire.’

For answer Fred Denville rose on the sill and leaped down into the garden, a good dozen feet, and ran swiftly for the wall at the bottom.

‘Halt!’ roared Sir Matthew; but the fugitive paid no heed, and in response to rapid orders four carbines were raised, there was a ringing little volley, and, to Linnell’s horror, Fred Denville made a bound, and fell upon his face.

‘Oh, this is too bad, sir!’ roared Mellersh fiercely.

‘Mind your own affairs, sir,’ said Sir Matthew sharply. ‘Saved him from being shot after a court-martial.’

In a few minutes the wounded man was borne in and laid in the hall, where Cora Dean was one of the first to fetch restoratives, while her mother brought a pillow and placed beneath his head, for a couple of the dragoons had been sent to fetch the means to transport him to the barracks.

It seemed at first that the one bullet which had struck him had been aimed too truly; but after a few minutes the

poor fellow opened his eyes, looked wildly round, and then recognised Linnell.

‘Ah!’ he ejaculated, ‘you! Look here. I was on the way—to give myself up—civil authorities—my father—in prison—innocent—Lady Teigne—murder—in a fit of drunkenness—I climbed up—to get the diamonds—save the poor old man—I—I—did the deed.’

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### MORTON DENVILLE BECOMES A MAN.

‘ You here, Morton ?’

‘ Yes. Don’t look at me like that, Claire, pray don’t. You can’t think what I’ve suffered.’

‘ What you’ve suffered ?’ said Claire coldly, as she recalled how she had taken a mother’s place to this boy for so many years till he had obtained his advancement in life, when he had turned from her. He had made some amends on the night of Mrs. Pontardent’s party ; but after that he had heard some whispered scandal, and had kept aloof more and more till the great trouble had fallen, and their father had been arrested, when he had stayed away and made no sign.

It had seemed so hard. When a few words on paper would have been so consolatory and have helped Claire in her agony and distress, Morton had not even written ; and now he came to her at last to tell her she did not know what he had suffered.

‘ You don’t know,’ he continued, with the tears in his eyes. ‘ It was bad enough to be in the regiment with Payne an Bray, always ready to chaff me and begin imitating the



old man, and that beast Rockley sneering at me ; but when people began to talk as they did about you, Clairry——’

‘ Silence !’ cried Claire, flashing up as she rose from her seat, and darted an indignant glance at the boy. ‘ If you have come only to insult your sister—go.’

‘ Don’t talk like that, Clairry dear,’ cried the boy. ‘ Don’t be so hard upon a fellow. I suffered horribly, for they did talk about you shamefully, and I was very nearly calling Sir Harry out, only the Colonel wouldn’t let me fight. I’m sure I behaved well enough. Every one said I did.’

‘ Why have you come this morning?’ said Claire coldly.

‘ Why have I come? Hark at her!’ said Morton piteously. ‘ Oh, dear, I wish I were a boy again, instead of an officer and a gentleman, and could go down and catch dabs with Dick Miggles off the pier.’

‘ Officer—gentleman? Morton, is it the act of a gentleman to side with the wretched people who made sport of your sister’s fame? To stand aloof when she is almost alone and unfriended, and this dreadful calamity has befallen us? Oh, Morton, are you my brother to act like this? Is it your manliness of which you made a point?’

‘ Claire—sis—dear sis,’ he cried, throwing himself on his knees, and clasping her waist as he burst into a boyish fit of passionate weeping. ‘ Don’t be so cruel to me. I have fought so hard. I have struggled against the pride, and shame, and misery of it all. You don’t know what a position mine has been, and I know now I ought to have taken your part and my father’s part against all the

world. But I've been a coward—a miserable, pitiful, weak coward, and it's a punishment to me. You, even you, hate me for it, and—and I wish I were dead.'

Claire's face softened as she looked down upon the lad in his misery and abasement, and after a momentary struggle to free herself from him she stood with her hands stretched out over the head that was buried in the folds of her dress, and a tender yearning look took the place of the hard angry glance that she had directed at him.

'I have fought, God knows how hard,' he went on between his sobs, 'but I'm only a boy after all, sis, and I hadn't the strength and manliness to stand up against the fellows at the mess. I've shut myself up because I've been ashamed to be seen, and I've felt sometimes as if I could run right away and go somewhere, so that I could be where I should not be known.'

Claire's hands trembled as they were very near his head now—as if they longed to clasp the lad's neck and hold him to her breast.

'I've been coming to you a hundred times, but my cursed cowardice has kept me back, and everything has been against me. There has been your trouble.'

Claire's hands shrank from him again.

'Then it was bad enough about father without this horrible charge.'

Claire's face grew hard and cold, and in a moment she seemed ten years older.

'Then there was poor Fred: Rockley's servant in my

regiment. You don't know what a position mine has been.'

Claire made no movement now. Her heart seemed to be hardening against the lad, and she shrank from him a little, but he clung to her tightly with his face hidden, and went on in the same piteous, boyish wail.

'I've been half mad sometimes about you and your troubles——'

Claire's hands began to rise again and tremble over his head.

'Sometimes about myself, and I've felt as if I was the most unlucky fellow in the world.'

There was a pause here, broken by the lad's passionate sobs.

'There : you hear me,' he said. 'I'm only a boy blubbering like this, but I feel pain as a man. I tell you, Clairry, dear sis, it has driven me nearly mad to know that this false charge was hanging over my father, and that he was in prison. The fellows at the mess have seemed to shrink from me, all but the Colonel, but whenever he has said a kind word to me I've known it was because the old man was in prison, and it has been like a knife going into me. I couldn't bear it. I hated myself, and I fought, I tell you, to do what was right, but I couldn't. It was as if the devil were dragging at me to draw me away, till this came, and then I felt that I could be a man, and now,' he cried, raising himself, and shaking his hair back, as he threw up his head proudly, 'forgive me, sis, or no—— D—— my commission !

D—— the regiment! D—— the whole world! I'm going down to the prison to stand by my poor old father, come what may.'

'My darling!'

Claire's arms were round his neck, and for the space of a few minutes she sobbed hysterically, as she strained him to her breast.

'What, sis? You forgive me?' he cried, as her kisses were rained upon his face.

'Forgive you, my own brave, true brother? Yes,' she cried. 'Of course I know what you have suffered. I know it all. It was a bitter struggle, dear, but you have conquered, and I never felt so proud of you as I feel now.'

'Sis!'

The tears that stole down from Claire's eyes seemed to give her the relief her throbbing brain had yearned for all these painful days, and her face lit up with a look of joy to which it had been a stranger for months.

'You will go to him then, dear?' she whispered, with the bright aspect fading out again, to give place to a cold, ashy look of dread, as the horror of their position came back, and the shadow of what seemed to Claire to be inevitable now crossed her spirit.

'Yes, I'm going. Poor old fellow! It will be a horrible shock to him about Fred.'

'About Fred?'

'Yes. Had I better tell him?'

'Tell him?' faltered Claire.

‘Yes. I thought not. He has enough to bear. I thought,’ said the lad bitterly, ‘that I was doing a brave thing when they brought him in. I said he was my poor brother: but I found that they all knew. Claire! Sis!’

She had staggered from him, and would have fallen had he not held on to her hand.

‘Speak—tell me!’ she cried. ‘No, no! I can’t bear it! Don’t tell me there is some new trouble come.’

‘What! Didn’t you know?’

She shook her head wildly, and wrung her hands and tried to speak, while he held her and whispered softly:

‘Oh, sis—sis—dear sis!’

‘Something has happened to Fred,’ she panted at last. ‘Tell me: I can bear it now. Anything. I am used to trouble, dear.’

‘My poor sis!’ he whispered.

‘Why do you not tell me?’ she cried wildly. ‘Do you not see how you are torturing me? Speak—tell me. What of Fred?’

Her imperious, insistent manner seemed to force the lad to speak, and he said, slowly and unwillingly:

‘He was going along the Parade, and ran up against Rockley, and Payne, and Bray; poor chap, he did not salute them, I believe, and Rockley gave him a cut with his whip.’

‘Major Rockley!’ cried Claire, with ashy lips.

‘Yes; and he knocked over Bray and that puppy Payne. Curse them! they were like skittles to him. Fred’s full of pluck; and, sis,’ cried Morton excitedly, as his eyes flashed

with pleasure, 'he took hold of that black-muzzled, black-guard Rockley, snatched his whip from him, and thrashed him till he couldn't stand.'

'Fred beat Major Rockley?' cried Claire, with a horrified look, as she realized the consequences forgotten for the moment by the boy.

'Yes; thrashed the blackguard soundly; but they followed him with a sergeant and a file or two of men to take him.'

'Yes. Go on.'

'They found him at Linnell's, talking to Richard Linnell and——'

Morton stopped with white face, and repented that he had said so much.

'I must know all,' cried Claire, trembling. 'I am sure to hear.'

'I can't tell you,' he said hoarsely.

'Is it not better that it should come from you than from a stranger?'

'It is too horrible, sis,' said the lad.

'Tell me, Morton, at once.'

Her words were cold and strange, and she laid her hands upon his shoulders, and gazed into his eyes.

The boy winced and hung his head as he said slowly:

'They called upon him to surrender, but——'

The lad raised his head, and tossing it back, his eyes flashed as he cried in a different tone:

'I can't help being proud of him—he was so full of pluck,

sis. He wouldn't surrender, but made a bold leap out of the window, and made a run for it; but that beast Bray gave the order, and they shot him down.'

'Shot him down!'

'Yes; but he's not dead, sis—only wounded; but——'

'But what? Why do you keep anything from me now?' cried Claire piteously.

'It's court-martial, and—it's court-martial for striking your officer, Claire, and he knows it; and, poor fellow, in a desperate fit, so as to get into the hands of the magistrates instead of the officers, to be condemned to death, he—he—Claire, I can't speak if you look at me in that wild way.'

'Go on!' she said hoarsely.

'He said—that it was not father—who killed Lady Teigne—but it was he.'



## CHAPTER XIX.

### MORTON BEARS THE NEWS FURTHER.

‘Do all you can to comfort them, Mrs. Barclay, please,’ said Morton, as he left the house. ‘It’s all so shocking, I don’t know what to say or do.’

‘You’ve done quite right in coming here, my dear,’ said Mrs. Barclay, whose eyes were red with weeping.

‘I’m afraid I’ve done more harm than good,’ said Morton dolefully. ‘Poor Claire, she’s half crazy with what she has to bear.’

‘You told her, then, about your brother Fred?’ said Mrs. Barclay, in a whisper.

The lad nodded.

‘It was quite right; she would have heard of it, and it was better it should come from you, my dear. Are you—are you going to see your poor father in prison?’

‘Yes,’ said Morton firmly. ‘I’ve got an order to see him, and I’m going at once.’

He turned round sharply, for he had received a hearty clap on the shoulder, and found that Barclay had ap-

proached him unperceived; and he now took the young fellow's hand and shook it warmly.

'Good lad!' he exclaimed. 'That's brave. Go and see him; and if you like you may tell him that Mr. Linnell and I have got the best lawyer in London to defend him.'

'You have, Mr. Barclay?'

'Yes; we have. There, don't stare at me like that. Your father once did me a good turn; and do you suppose a money-lender has no bowels? You tell him—no, don't tell him. He is in a queer, obstinate way just now, and you've got your work cut out to tell him about your brother's trouble. That's enough for one day, but you may give him a bit of comfort about your sisters. You can tell him that my stupid, obstinate old wife has got 'em in hand, and that as long as there's a roof over Mrs. Barclay's head, and anything to eat, Miss Denville will share them. No, no; don't shake hands with me. I've nothing to do with it. It's all her doing.'

Morton could not speak, but gripped the money-lender's hand tightly before turning to Mrs. Barclay. He held out his hand and took hers, his lips trembling as he gazed in the plump, motherly face. Then, with something like a sob of a very unmanly nature, he threw his arms round her and kissed her twice.

'God bless you!' he cried; and he turned and ran out of the room.

Barclay's face puckered up as his wife sank down in a chair sobbing, with her handkerchief to her eyes, and rocking

herself to and fro, but only to start up in alarm as Barclay dashed to the fireplace, and caught up the poker, before running towards the door.

‘Jo-si-ah!’ she cried, catching his arm.

‘Just got away in time, a scoundrel—and before my very face! You suffered it, too, madam.’

‘Oh—oh—oh—oh!’ sobbed Mrs. Barclay hysterically, as she took the poker away, and replaced it in the fender before throwing herself on her husband’s breast. ‘My own dear old man! I won’t ever say a word again about money. The best and dearest fellow that ever lived!’

Barclay drew her close to him and played the elderly lover very pleasantly and well, leading his plump wife to a sofa, and sitting down by her with her head resting upon his shoulder.

‘Hush, old lady, don’t cry so,’ he whispered. ‘What’s the good of having money if you don’t try and do some good with it? I like little Claire; she’s about as near an angel as we find them in Saltinville; and as for poor old Denville, he has been the most unlucky of men. He’s not a bad fellow at heart, and as for that affair about old Lady Teigne—well, there’s no knowing what a man may do when tempted by poverty and with a lot of jewels twinkling before his eyes.’

‘Oh, hush, Jo-si-ah, you don’t think—you can’t think \_\_\_\_’

‘Hush, old girl! we must not think it of him aloud. We must get him off, but I’m very much afraid.’

‘Oh, Jo-si-ah, don’t say it, dear.’

‘Only to you, my gal. I’m afraid the poor old fellow was trying to—well, say borrow a few diamonds, and what happened afterwards was an accident.’

‘Oh, my dear! my dear!’

‘It looks sadly like it.’

‘But this Fred Denville says he did it.’

‘Yes, poor lad, to get clear of his officers, and to save his father’s life. That will go for nothing. Soldiers often charge themselves with crimes to get out of the army. That story will never be believed.’

Morton Denville shivered as he approached the prison, and felt half disposed to turn back as he encountered a couple of men of his regiment; but he mastered his nervousness and walked boldly up to the gate and was admitted.

He found his father in much the same despondent attitude as he had occupied when Fred Denville came to the prison, and Morton stood with his lip quivering and breast heaving, looking down for some minutes at the wasted form.

‘Father,’ he said at last, but there was no reply, and when the lad went and laid a hand upon his shoulder, the old man did not start, but raised his head in a dazed manner, as if he did not quite realize who it was.

Then, recognizing him, he rose from his stool, smiling sadly.

‘You, Morton!’ he said. ‘You have come!’

Morton did not answer for a few moments, struggling as he was with intense emotion, and the Master of the Ceremonies looked at him keenly now. His face changed

directly, though, as Morton threw his arms round him and stood with his head bowed down upon the old man's shoulder.

'I'm glad: very glad. Egad, Morton, my son,' said Denville, trying to assume his old parade manner, but with his piping voice quavering, and sounding forced and strained, 'you make me feel very proud of you. It is, of course—yes, egad—of course—a very painful thing for a gentleman—an officer—to have to visit—a relative in prison—a man situated as I am—to a man in 'your position, it is a terrible thing—and—and you'll pardon me—my son—I could not have felt—er—surprised if you had—stayed away; but—but—you have come; and—God bless you, my boy—my boy.'

The old man would have sunk upon his seat quivering with emotion, but Morton held him in his clasp.

'No, no, father,' he said with spirit, 'you must not give way. We must meet this trouble like men. You must advise with me. I've been playing the boy too long. There, sit down and let's talk. What shall I do about your trial?'

Denville took his son's hand, and looked at him proudly, but he shook his head.

'What do you mean, father?' cried Morton, the lad flushing and looking manly as he spoke. 'This is no time for indecision. I have seen Mr. Barclay and Mr. Linnell. They have engaged counsel, and what we want now is your help over your defence.'

Denville smiled sadly, and again shook his head,

'No, my boy, no,' he said, 'you can do nothing. It is very brave and true of you.'

‘But, father——’

‘Hush, my son ! Let me speak and act as my knowledge and experience dictate. I am glad you have come, for you have been much in my mind ; and I want to get you as free as I can from this horrible disgrace.’

‘My dear old father, don’t think of me,’ pleaded Morton, ‘but of yourself.’

‘Of myself, my boy ? No, I am only an old worn-out stock, and I am quite resigned to my fate—to my duty. I am old ; you are young. There is your future to think of, and your sister’s. Look here——’

‘But, my dear father,’ cried Morton, ‘I must insist. I am only a mere boy, I know, but I am forced to take command.’

‘Not yet, Morton ; I have not resigned. You’ll pardon me, my son—wounded, but not unfit to command—as yet. Morton, my boy, Lord Carboro’ has always been my friend. Go to him, my son, and ask him to use his influence to get you an exchange into some other regiment. Try foreign service, my boy, for a few years. It will be taking you clear of the stain upon our name. Claire has friends, I have no fear for her—good, true woman. It is about you I am concerned. You must exchange and get right away from here. Go at once. Carboro’ will see the necessity, and advise and help you.’

‘And leave you here in prison—in peril of your life ; charged with a crime you did not commit ? Father, you don’t know me yet.’



The old man's lip quivered, and he grasped his son's hand firmly.

'It is my wish, my boy. For your sake and for your sister's,' he said firmly. 'You must go at once.'

'And leave you here—like this, father?'

'Yes, my boy—it is my fate,' said the old man sadly. 'I can bear it. You must go.'

'And leave Fred in his trouble?'

'Silence! Don't name him. Don't let me hear his name again,' said the old man, firing up.

But it was only a flash of the old fire which died out at once, and he grew pale and weak again, his head sinking upon his breast.

'Father!' cried Morton, 'I can't bear this. You are too bitter against poor Fred, and it seems doubly hard now.'

'Hush! Say no more, my boy. You do not know,' cried the old man angrily. 'You do not know.'

'It is you who do not know, father. You have not heard that he has been shot down.'

'Fred—my son—shot?'

'Yes, while attempting to escape from arrest, father. He is dangerously wounded. Forgive me for telling you at such a time, but you seem so hard upon him.'

'Hard, my boy? You do not know.'

'I know he is dangerously wounded, and that he is your son.'

'My God!' muttered Denville, with his lip quivering—'a judgment—a judgment upon him for his crime.'



‘And that in his misery and pain he raised his voice bravely to try and save you, father, by charging himself with the murder of Lady Teigne.’

‘What?’ cried the old man excitedly. ‘Fred—my son—charged himself with this crime?’

‘Yes; he boldly avowed himself as the murderer.’

‘Where—where is he?’ cried Denville excitedly.

‘In the infirmary; weak with his wound. Father, you will forgive the past, and try to be friends with him when—when you meet again.’

The Master of the Ceremonies looked up sadly in his son’s face and bowed his head slowly.

‘Yes,’ he said sadly; ‘I will try—when we meet again. But tell me, my boy,’ he cried agitatedly; ‘they do not believe what he says—this—this charge against himself?’

‘No; they look upon it as what it is—a brave piece of self-denial to save his father from this terrible position. Oh, father! you did not think he could be so staunch and true.’

‘They don’t believe it,’ muttered Denville. ‘No; they would not. It does not alter the situation in the least. I shall suffer, and he will be set free.’

‘You shall not suffer, father,’ cried Morton impetuously. ‘Surely there is justice to be had in England. No, I will not have you give way in this weak, imbecile manner. There: no more now; I must go, and I shall consult with your friends.’

‘No; I forbid it,’ cried the old man sternly. ‘You will

not be disobedient to me now that I am helpless, Morton, my son. You cannot see it all as I see it.'

'No, father; I hope I see it more clearly.'

'Rash boy! you are blind, while it is my eyes that are opened. Morton, one of us must die for this crime. I tell you I could not live, knowing that I did so at the expense of your brother who had gone, young in years and unrepentant, to his account.'

'Unrepentant, father?'

'Hush, hush, my boy! No more. I can bear no more.'

'Time, sir,' said the voice of the gaoler, and Morton went sadly back to join his sisters.

## CHAPTER XX.

### UNDER PRESSURE.

‘FATHER, I am nearly mad with grief and horror. I come to you for help—for comfort. What shall I do?’ cried Claire, sinking upon her knees before him on her next visit to the prison.

‘What comfort can I give you, child?’

‘Oh, father, dear father, were not our sufferings enough that this other trouble should come upon us? Fred——’

‘Yes, tell me of him,’ cried the old man excitedly. ‘Is he very bad?’

‘Dangerously wounded, father. And this story of his! They believe it, father; what shall I do?’

‘Do, my child?’

‘They will take him and punish him for the crime. I fear they will, for he persists that it was he.’

‘And you would save him and let me die,’ said the old man bitterly.

‘No, no. Don’t, pray don’t, speak like that, father. Think of what I must feel. I’d lay down my life to save

you both, but it seems so horrible that my brother should die for that of which he is innocent.'

The old man wrested himself from her grasp, and paced the cell like some caged wild creature, seeking to be free.

'I cannot bear it,' he exclaimed. 'Heaven help me for a wretched weak man. Why has this complication come to tempt me? Claire, I would have died—without a murmur, without a word, but this dangling before me the means of escape is too much. Yesterday, I did not fear death. To-day, I am a coward. I see before me the hideous beam, the noosed rope, the executioner, and the hooting crowd, hungry to see me strangled to death, and I fear it, I tell you, for the hope of life has begun to burn strongly again now that Fred has spoken as he has.'

'Father!'

'Yes; you shrink from me, but you do not know. Claire, I speak to you as I could speak to none else, for you have known so much from the beginning. You know how I have suffered.'

'Yes, yes,' she said mournfully.

'You know how I have shrunk and writhed in spirit to see you loathe me as you have, and look upon me as something unutterably base and vile. Have I not suffered a very martyrdom?'

'Yes, father, yes,' sighed Claire.

'And heaven knows I would not have spoken. I would have gone boldly to the scaffold, and died, a sacrifice for another's crime. But now that he has confessed—now that

he denounces himself, and I see life before me once again, the desire to live comes so strongly to this poor weak creature that my lips seem to be unsealed, and I must—I must have your love, Claire, as of old.'

'Father!' cried Claire with a horrified look, as if she doubted his reason.

'Yes, you are startled; you wonder at me, but, Claire, my child, had I gone to the gallows it would have been as a martyr, as a father dying for his son's crime. Claire, my child, I am an innocent man.'

'Father!'

'Yes,' he cried, 'innocent. You never had cause to shrink from me; and while a thousand times you wrung my heart, I said to myself, "You must bear it. You cannot retain her love and win your safety by accusing your son."'

'Father, you rave,' cried Claire. 'This hope of escape has made you grasp at poor Fred's weak self-accusation. You would save yourself at the expense of the life of your own child.'

'Did I accuse him of the murder, Claire?'

'No, not till now; and oh, father, it is monstrous.'

'Did he not accuse himself, stung by conscience after seeing me here?'

'It is not true. He could not have done such a thing.'

'Indeed!' said Denville bitterly; 'and yet I saw him leave the bedside, and stand with the jewel-casket in his hand. I say so to you, for I cannot bear it, child. Let

them kill me if they will. Let them save my son ; but let me, my child, let me go to my grave with the knowledge that you believe me true and innocent, and that I bore all that my son might live.'

'Then you will not denounce him?'

'I? To save myself! No, though I would live. You do not believe me innocent, my child. You think me a murderer.'

'Father, I believe you were beside yourself with your troubles, and that you were going to take those jewels when you were interrupted, and, in a fit of madness, did this deed to save yourself and children from disgrace.'

'Claire, Claire,' groaned the old man, 'if you—if you only could have believed in me, I could have borne all, but you turn from me. Will you not believe in me? Have you not realized my self-sacrifice?'

'Oh, father, what can I say—what can I do?' cried Claire. 'Do you not see my position? Can I think of my poor brother now as the guilty man?'

'No,' he said, taking her in his arms, and trying to soothe her in her agonized grief; 'it is too much to ask you, my child. It is too much for such a one as you to be called upon to even think of. I will not press you, Claire; neither will I ask you to forgive me. I could not do that now. Only try to think of me as innocent. I ask you once more, my darling; I ask you once more.'

Claire threw her arms round his neck and drew his head down to her bosom.

‘I am your child,’ she whispered softly. ‘Father dear, good-bye—good-bye.’

‘So soon?’ muttered Denville. ‘Yes; good-bye—good-bye.’

He held her hand till she was half through the door; and then, as it was closed, he tottered back to his seat, and once more sank down to bury his face within his hands.



## CHAPTER XXI.

### FROM PRISON TO PRISON.

‘MORTON,’ said Claire hoarsely, as she returned to where her brother was waiting, ‘are you still strong at heart?’

‘Strong? Yes,’ he cried. ‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Take me to Fred.’

The young officer started, but he drew a long breath and rose erect.

‘Come along,’ he said. ‘Colonel Lascelles will give me an order to see him. But, Claire darling, can you bear to meet him now?’

‘My own brother? Morton, could I stay away from you if sickness or a wound had laid you low?’

‘Come,’ he said abruptly; and, taking her arm, he led her along the parade on their way towards the barracks.

Before they had gone far Morton’s cheeks flushed, for he saw Lord Carboro’ approaching, and he felt ready to turn out of the way.

‘He will cut us dead,’ thought Morton. ‘We are disgraced for ever.’

To his surprise, as they drew near, Lord Carboro’ took off

his hat, and held it in his hand, bowing low to Claire as she passed him.

Fifty yards further they encountered Richard Linnell and Mellersh, who, without having seen Lord Carboro's act, imitated it exactly, and drew aside to let them pass.

Morton felt his heart throb with pleasure. He had expected those who knew them to treat them slightly, and his sister was being treated with the deference due to a queen, while he was receiving respect such as had never been paid to him before.

He held his head the higher, and gaining in confidence walked boldly on, proud of the closely-veiled figure at his side, as Claire drooped over his arm ; but, as he drew nearer to the barracks, he felt a curious tremor attacking him, and it needed all his strength of mind to keep up and face his brethren of the mess.

Claire shrank more and more as they entered the gates and crossed the barrack-yard, but Morton had screwed himself up to the sticking point, and he would have died sooner than have turned tail now.

Dragoon after dragoon saluted him, and he caught sight of Sir Harry Payne, but that officer had the grace to turn off, and they reached the Colonel's quarters without an unpleasant encounter.

They were shown in at once, and without taking chairs Morton stood defiant and proud awaiting the entrance of the Colonel, and supporting his sister.

They were not kept waiting long before the Colonel en-

tered, Morton meeting his eyes with a fiercely independent look.

He was armed against an unarmed man, for the old Colonel's first act was to place a chair for Claire, bowing to her with chivalrous deference, while directly after, in place of treating his subaltern with freezing distance, he held out his hand and shook Morton's warmly.

The young officer had truly said that he was only a boy, for this kindly act and the old Colonel's sympathetic look threw him off his balance, and his lip began to quiver and his face to change.

'You've come to ask for a pass to see your brother, Denville,' said Colonel Lascelles. 'Yes, of course, of course. Very sad—very painful business, my dear lad. No fault of yours, of course. Don't scruple to ask me for any assistance I can give you, my dear boy. As far as my duty will allow me, you can count upon me. There: that's it,' he said, blotting a sheet of paper, and handing it promptly to the young officer, while he chivalrously refrained from even glancing at the sorrow-burdened figure at his side.

'By-the-way, Denville,' he whispered, calling the young fellow aside, 'you can take what leave you like now.'

The flush came back to Morton's face, and he was drawing himself up, but the Colonel took one hand, while he laid his left upon the lad's shoulder.

'No, no, no: I don't mean that, my dear boy. You have behaved uncommonly well, and I never respected you half so much as I do now. No gentleman in the regiment, I am

sure, will think otherwise than I do. Yours is a very painful position, Denville, and, believe me, you have my sympathy from my heart.'

Morton grasped his hand firmly, and then hurried away, for he could not trust himself to speak.

Another encounter had to be gone through, though, and that was with a tall, dark officer who came upon them suddenly.

Morton flushed up again as he felt Claire start, and saw Rockley stop suddenly, as if about to speak eagerly to the shrinking girl; but he found Morton's eyes fixed upon him, and returning the look with an angry scowl he passed on.

A minute later and they were in the infirmary, where, looking white and pinched of aspect, Fred Denville lay, with a regimental nurse at his side.

The man rose, and left the side of the bed, for Claire to take his seat.

'He is to be kept very quiet, ma'am. Doctor's orders,' said the man respectfully. 'I shall be just outside if you want anything.'

Fred was lying with his eyes half closed, but he heard the voice and opened them, recognised his visitors, and tried to raise his hand, but it fell back upon the coverlid.

'Claire?' he said in a voice little above a whisper. 'An officer?'

He smiled sadly, and then seemed half choked by a sob, as Claire threw herself on her knees by him and Morton went

to the other side, bent over, and laid his hand upon that lying helpless upon the coverlid.

‘Fred, old fellow,’ said Morton in a husky voice.

He could say no more, but stood looking down upon the prostrate figure, awe-stricken at the ravages caused by the wound.

‘Fred—dearest Fred,’ whispered Claire, kissing the hand she held.

The wounded man groaned.

‘No, no,’ he said faintly. ‘You should not be here ; I am no fit company for you now.’

‘Oh, Fred, dear Fred,’ cried Claire passionately, ‘how could you charge yourself with that dreadful crime?’

‘How?’ he said faintly. ‘Because it must have been true. The poor old man saw me there, and found my knife upon the carpet.’

‘It is impossible,’ sobbed Claire.

‘I thought so once,’ replied the wounded man, ‘but I suppose it’s true. I often used to think of the old woman’s jewels, and how useful they’d be. It seemed so easy, too, the way up there—eh, Morton?’

‘Yes, yes ; but don’t talk like that. Some scoundrel must have seen me climb up, and have gone there that night.’

‘Yes,’ said Fred feebly, ‘some scoundrel who knew the way, but who, in his drunkenness, did not know what he did, and that scoundrel was I.’

‘No, no, Fred !’ cried Claire.

‘If you did it,’ said Morton quickly, ‘what became of the diamonds?’

‘The diamonds, lad?’

‘Yes. Did you have the jewels and sell them?’

‘Never a stone,’ said Fred slowly. ‘No, it’s all like a cloud. It always is like a cloud over my mind when I’ve been having the cursed drink. It sends me mad.’

Claire gazed at him wildly.

‘You ought not to be here, Clairey. Take her away, lad. I’m no fit company for her. But tell me—the old man? They have set him free?’

‘No, not yet,’ said Morton sadly.

‘But he must be set free at once. Poor, weak old fellow! He has suffered enough. Morton, lad, go to him and try to get him out. Him kill the old woman? He hadn’t it in him.’

Fred Denville turned so faint that he seemed to be losing his senses, but Claire bathed his face, and he recovered and smiled up at her.

‘It’s hard work to tell you to go, Clairey dear, but you mustn’t stay here. Say one kind word to me, though, my dear; I haven’t had much to do with kindness since I left home. I’m sorry I disgraced you all so. Ask the old man to forgive me, and tell him I should like to shake hands with him once, just once, before it’s all over.’

‘Fred, my dear brother,’ whispered Claire, pressing his hand to her breast, while Morton held the other.

‘Ah!’ sighed the wounded man, ‘that’s better. Morton, lad, it will soon be over, and people forget these things in a



few days. I'm only in the way. I always have been. You'll get on better when I'm gone.'

'Hush, Fred!'

He turned his head to Claire, who was gazing at him with burning eyes that seemed drained of the last tears.

'You always were a good, true girl to me, Clairey,' he whispered faintly, 'and I want you to think well of me when I'm gone. I did this horrid thing, but I swear I have no recollection of it, and I never reaped a shilling advantage from the theft.'

The same feeling animated father and son in this time of peril—the desire to stand well in the eyes of Claire, who seemed to them as the whole world.

'Think the best you can of me, my little girl,' he whispered. 'It will soon be over, and—there's one comfort—I shall die as a soldier should—do you hear, Morton? No hangman's rope to disgrace us more. I fell under fire, my lad, and I shall laugh at the judges, and prison, and scaffold and all.'

'Hush! for heaven's sake, Fred!' cried Morton.

'Yes, I will. It's too much—to talk. I was in a rage with them for shooting me. It was that bully—Bray; but I forgive him, for it saves us all from trouble and disgrace. Morton, lad, don't stop in the regiment. Exchange—do you hear? Exchange, and get them away—Claire and May and the old man—to somewhere else when I'm dead.'

'Fred! Brother!' wailed Claire.

He smiled at her, and tried to raise her hand to his cheek.



‘Yes, little girl!’ he said tenderly. ‘It’s quite right. Cuts the knot—the hangman’s knot.’

There was a bitter, decisive tone in these last words, but he changed his manner again directly, and spoke gently and tenderly.

‘It is no use to hide it, dear sis,’ he said. ‘I can’t live above a day or two. I know I shall not, and you see it is for the best. It saves the old man, and much of the disgrace to you two. Poor old fellow! I never understood him, Clairey, as I should. Under all that sham and fashionable show he tried hard for us. God bless him! he’s a hero.’

‘Fred, Fred, you are breaking my heart,’ wailed Claire.

‘No, no, little one,’ said Fred, a nervous accession of strength enabling him to speak out clearly and firmly now. ‘You must be strong and brave. You will see afterwards that it was all for the best, and that I am of some good to you all at last. Try and be strong and look at it all as a blessing. Can you bring the old man here? Morton, lad, with my last breath I’ll pray that you may grow up as true and brave a fellow. Just think of it, you two—that night. He saw me in the room and escape, and he held his tongue to save me! Do you remember that day, Clairey, when he found me with you and attacked me as he did? I couldn’t understand it, then. Ah! it’s all plain enough, now. No wonder he hated me.’

‘Fred, you must not talk,’ said Morton.

‘Not talk, lad?’ said Fred with a sad smile. ‘I’ve not much more chance. Let me say a few words now.’

He lay silent though for a few moments, and his eyes closed as if glad of the rest; but at the end of a short space he began again in a half-wandering manner.

‘Brave old fellow! Not a word. Even when they took him. Wouldn’t betray me because I was his own son. Tell Claire to tell him—some one tell him—I know why. It was because I was poor mother’s favourite—poor mother! How fond she was of me! The scapegrace. They always love the black sheep. Claire—fetch Claire.’

He uttered this wildly, and she bent over him, trembling.

‘I am here, dear Fred.’

He stared at her without recognition for a few minutes, and then smiled at her lovingly.

‘Only a bad headache, mother,’ he said. ‘Better soon. Don’t look at me like that. I didn’t mean to kill the old woman. I can’t remember doing it. What a time it is since I’ve seen you. But look here, mother. Mind Claire. That scoundrel Rockley! I know him. Stand at nothing. Mind poor Claire, and——’

A spasm seemed to shoot through him, and he uttered a faint cry of agony as he knit his brow.

‘Did you speak, dear?’ he said huskily. ‘Have I been asleep?’

‘I—I think so,’ faltered Claire.

‘Yes, I fell asleep. I was dreaming of the poor mother. Claire dear, it would have killed her to see me here like this. There, there, it’s all for the best. I want to sleep. Tell the old man he must come and forgive me before I go.

Bring him, Morton, lad. No : you bring him, Claire. It will be pain to you, my child, but it is to help me. He will forgive me—brave, noble old fellow that he is—if you are standing by.’

The door opened, and the military nurse appeared.

‘The doctor says that you must not stay longer now, ma’am,’ he whispered.

‘Quite right,’ said Fred softly, and with the manner of one accustomed to yield to discipline. ‘Come again to-morrow—bring the old man to me—good-bye, dear, good-bye.’

He hardly turned his head to Morton, but feebly pressed the hand that held his. His eyes were fixed with a wild yearning on the sweet, tender face that bent over him, and then closed as he uttered a sigh of content with the long loving embrace that ensued.

Then, utterly prostrate, Morton led his sister from the room used as an infirmary, and across the barrack yard to the gates where a carriage was in waiting.

Morton Denville was half stunned by the scene he had just witnessed, and moved as if mechanically, for he, young as he was, had read the truth in his brother’s face and felt that even if it were possible to obtain leave, he would not probably be able to get his father to the barracks in time.

It seemed quite a matter of course that a footman should be holding the door of this carriage open, and that the servant should draw back for them to enter, close it, and then mount behind, to shout over the roof ‘Mr. Barclay’s,’

when the carriage was driven off. Morton Denville said little, and did not realize the chivalrous kindness of Lord Carboro', in sending his carriage to fetch Claire back after her painful visit.

Claire saw absolutely nothing, half blind with weeping, her veil down over her face, and a blacker veil of despair closing her in on every side, as she fought and struggled with the thoughts that troubled her. She was utterly incapable of grasping what went on around her.

Now her father seemed to stand before her innocent, and her erring brother, the true culprit, having, as he had told her, committed the crime in a drunken fit. Now a change came over her, and she shuddered with horror as it seemed to her that the author of her being had made his crime hideously worse in trying to escape its consequences by charging his eldest born with the dreadful sin.

Her brain was in a whirl, and she could not think, only pray for oblivion—for rest—since her mental agony was too great to bear.

One minute she had been gazing on the pallid face of the brother whom she had loved so well; the next, darkness had fallen, and she barely realized the fact that she was handed into a carriage and driven off. All she felt was that there was a place against which she could lay her throbbing head, and that Morton was trying to whisper words of comfort in her ear.

Their departure was seen, though, by several.

Rockley, with a singularly uneasy look upon his dark,

handsome face—dread, rage, and despairing love, shown there by turns—watched the brother and sister leave the barracks, cross the yard, and enter Lord Carboro's carriage, and then uttered a furious oath as he saw them driven off.

Lord Carboro' himself, too, was near at hand to see that his commands were executed without a hitch, and the old man went off thoughtfully down to the pier, to sit and watch the sea, snuff-box in one hand, clouded cane in the other.

'Poor old Denville!' he muttered softly; and then, below his breath, 'Poor girl!'

Lastly, Richard Linnell and Mellersh saw Claire enter the old nobleman's handsome chariot, and a curious grey look came over the younger man's countenance like a shadow, as he stood watching the departure, motionless till the carriage had disappeared, when Mellersh took him by the arm——

'Come, Dick,' he whispered, 'be a man.'

Linnell turned upon him fiercely.

'I do try,' he cried, 'but at every turn there is something to tempt me with fresh doubts.'

## CHAPTER XXII.

### NATURE'S TEMPTATION.

CLAIRE DENVILLE sat back in her chair utterly exhausted, and feeling as if her brain was giving way. The news from the prison was as hopeless as ever. Fred lay lingering at the barrack infirmary; and though May was better she was querulous, and in that terribly weak state when life seems to be a burden and thought a weariness and care.

She was asleep now, and Claire had just risen softly so as not to awaken her, and make her resume her complaints and questions as to how soon her father would come back and forgive her, and when her husband would return and take her home, for she was weary of lying there.

Unreasoning in her weakness, she had that afternoon been bitterly reproaching Claire for not fetching her child, that she might nurse and play with it—at a time when she could hardly hold up her arm—and when she had been firmly but kindly refused she had burst into a torrent of feeble, querulous reproaches, which had been maddening to Claire in her excited, overstrained state.

The door opened, and Mrs. Barclay's beaming counten-



ance appeared, and she stood there beckoning with her fat finger.

‘Let’s stand outside and talk,’ she whispered. ‘That’s right: close the door. Now then, my dear, I’ll go in and sit with your sister there, for you’re getting overdone; and I tell you what, it’s a fine soft evening, you put on your bonnet and shawl and go and have a walk. I don’t like your going alone, but just take one sharp walk as far as the pier and back, two or three times. It’ll do you good.’

‘Have you any news, Mrs. Barclay?’ said Claire, ignoring the wish expressed.

‘Not yet, my dear, but everybody’s working for you. Now, do go.’

Claire hesitated, and then in obedience to the reiterated wish she mechanically did as she was bid, and went out into the cool soft night, the beating of the waves sounding loudly on the shore, while as they broke a glow as of fire ran along their crests, flashing and sparkling with soft radiance along the shore.

But Claire saw nothing, heard nothing—neither the figure that came quickly after her as she left the house, nor the sound of steps.

For all was one weary confused trouble in her brain, and everything seemed forced and unnatural, as if it were the mingling of some dream.

Mrs. Barclay had bidden her walk as far as the pier, and in all obedience she had done as she was told, reaching the pier entrance; and then, attracted she knew not how or



why by the darkness and silence, she turned on to the wooden edifice, and began to walk swiftly along the planked floor.

It was very dark that night, only at the end there was a single light that shone brightly, and in her confused state this seemed to be the star of hope leading her on.

She had not had the slightest intention of going there, but in a rapt dreamy way she walked on and on, the vacant place seeming strange. The last time she had stood on the pier it had been thronged with well-dressed promenaders, but that was months—it seemed years—ago, while endless horrors had taken place since then.

How calm and still it all was where she walked, while below among the piles the sea softly ebbcd and flowed and throbbed, seeming full of whisperings and voices that were hushed lest she should hear the words they said.

She walked on and still on, and it occurred to her once that it was along here that beautiful Cora Dean's ponies had dashed, taking her over the end into the sea, from which Richard Linnell, so brave and honest, had saved her. She had often heard how the crowd cheered him—Richard Linnell. Cora loved him and was jealous of her, and yet she had no cause to be, for the events of the terrible night—the night of the ghastly serenade—killed that for ever.

Why did she think of all this now? She could not tell. It came. She felt that she was not answerable for her thoughts—hardly for herself, as she turned and looked back

at the faint lights twinkling upon the Parade. It seemed as if she were saying good-bye to the town, where, in spite of the early struggles with poverty, there had been so much happiness, as in her young love dream she had felt that Richard Linnell cared for her.

Yes; it was like saying good-bye to it with all its weary troubles and bitter cares.

She walked on and on, right to the end, but the light did not shed its beams upon her now. It was no longer a star of hope. It sent its light far out to sea, but she was below it in the shade, and hope was forgotten as she leaned over the rail at the end, listening to the mysterious whisperings of the water in amongst the piles, and looking down into the transparent darkness all lit up with tiny lambent points which were ever going and coming. Now and then there would be a pale bluish-golden flash of light, and then quite a ribbon of dots and flashes, as some fish sped through the sea, but it only died out, leaving the soft transparency lit up with the faint dots and specks that were ever moving.

To her right, though, there was a cable, curving down into the sea, and rising far out, after nearly touching the sands, to ascend to the deck of a large smack aground on the bank. That rope was one mass of lambent light, a huge chain of pallid gold that glowed all round; and as Claire Denville gazed there was a rift in the clouds overhead, and from far above the rays from a cluster of stars were reflected like a patch of diamonds in the sea, and she turned shudderingly away to gaze down once more at the transparent dark-

ness, where the moving specks seemed to have a peculiar fascination.

How the softly flowing and ebbing waves whispered below there amid the piles and down under the platform where her brother used to fish! How soothing and restful it all was to her aching head! The troubles that had been maddening her seemed to float away, and everything was calm and cool. As she stood thinking there a dreamy sensation came over her, such as comes to those who have awakened after the crisis of a fever. Hers had been a fever of the brain, a mental fever; and now all seemed so calm and still that she heaved a sigh, half sob, and the troubles died away in the past.

The transparent water into which she gazed, with its flashes of luminous splendour, seemed to grow more and more mysterious and strange. It was so like oblivion that it began to tempt her to trust herself to it and rest: for she was so weary! Trouble after trouble—the long series of cares—had been so terrible a strain that she felt that she could bear no more, and that the sea offered her forgetfulness and rest.

She did not know why she came there: it was not against her will—it was not with her will. Her mind seemed to be stunned, and it was as if her wearied body had drawn her there.

She leaned over the rail, with the cool, soft, refreshing air bathing her burning forehead, and watched one brilliant point of light—soft and lambent—that was near the surface,

and then moved slowly down lower and lower into the dark depths that seemed beyond fathoming; and, as she watched it, the fancy came upon her that these points of light might be lives like hers, wearied out and now resting and gliding here and there in the soft transparent darkness at her feet.

Father—brother—sister—Richard Linnell—her past cares—all appeared distant and strange, and she had no more control over herself than has one in a dream. There was that weariness of spirit—of a spirit that had been whipped and spurred until jaded beyond endurance—that weariness that asked for rest—rest at whatever cost; and whispered that rest could only come in the great sleep—the last.

It did not seem like death, to step from the end of the pier into the dark water. There was nothing horrible therein. On the contrary, it wooed and beckoned her to its breast, offering utter oblivion when, in her more lucid moments, she felt she must go mad.

As if guided by instinct more than her own will, she turned at last from the rail and took a few steps in the darkness towards the side where the damp salt-soaked flight of steps led to the platform below—the rough landing-stage beneath where she had been standing.

Here, as she stood close to the edge with the black piles looming up around, she fancied they were the whisperers as the water heaved and plashed, and rippled and fell. There was no rail here between her and the rest that seemed to ask her to sink down into its arms, now that she was so weary, and unconsciously she was standing where her



brother had stood and listened many months ago at the footsteps overhead, as he enjoyed his stolen pleasure in the middle of the night.

But there was no heavy step now—no voice to break the curious spell that was upon her, drawing her away from life, and bidding her sleep.

She was not afraid ; she was not excited. Everything seemed to her dull and dreamy and restful, as she stood on the very verge of the open platform, with the water now only a few inches from her feet, leaning more and more over, till the slightest further movement would have overbalanced her, and she would have fallen in, to sink without a cry.

She hardly started as a firm hand gripped her arm, and she was drawn sharply back, to be held tightly by him who had followed her below, watching her every action and standing close behind her in the darkness with outstretched hands.

‘ Miss Denville—Claire—for heaven’s sake, what does this mean ?’

She did not struggle, but turned round slowly, and looked in the dimly seen face.

‘ Richard Linnell !’ she said, as if wondering at his presence.

‘ Yes, Richard Linnell,’ he cried, panting with emotion. ‘ Claire, my love, has it come to this ?’

She did not shrink from him as he drew her closely to his side, and his arm clasped her waist, but gazed up at him in the same half-wondering way.

‘Why are you here?’ he said hoarsely. ‘Surely you were not thinking—oh, it is impossible.’

Still she did not answer, but in a slow, dull way extricated herself from his grasp, and pressed her hands over her face, covering her eyes for a few moments till she felt his touch as he laid his hand upon her arm.

‘Claire,’ he whispered, ‘you do not speak to me. Why do you not say something to drive away these horrible thoughts. You here—at this hour—alone? Is it my fate to be always misunderstanding you?’

She shuddered slightly, as if his words were reviving memories of other meetings, and now she spoke.

‘I don’t know why I am here,’ she said in a dazed, helpless way. ‘I have had so much trouble. I was tired!’

‘Trouble!’ he whispered. ‘Claire dearest, if you only knew how I loved you. Let me share the trouble—help you through everything.’

‘Hush! Don’t speak to me like that, Richard Linnell,’ she said slowly, as if she had to think deeply before she uttered a word. ‘I cannot talk to you now. My head!’

She paused and gazed at him helplessly, laying her hand upon her brow.

‘You ought not to have been alone,’ he said, earnestly. ‘But tell me—you were not thinking of that——’

He pointed with a shudder to the sea that whispered and hissed below where they stood.

‘I don’t know,’ she sighed, still in the same dazed way.

‘I came, and it seemed to draw me towards it. I am so weary—so tired out.’

He caught her in his arms, and held her head down upon his shoulder, as he whispered in a voice deep with emotion :

‘Weary, my poor girl, weary indeed. Now rest there, and, heaven helping me, half your trouble shall pass away. For I love you, Claire, love you with all my heart, and I too have suffered more than I can tell.’

She made no resistance to his embrace, but sighed deeply, as if he was giving her the support she needed in her time of weakness ; but his heart sank within him as he felt how helpless and dazed she was. She yielded to him, but it was not the yielding of one who loved, neither was there a suggestion of caress in her words. He knew that she was half distraught with the suffering that had fallen to her lot ; and holding her more tightly for a moment, he pressed his lips once reverently on her forehead, and then drew her arm through his.

‘I will take you back,’ he said.

She looked up at him, and a pang shot through his breast as he realized how weak she had become.

‘Yes,’ she said at last, ‘you will take me back.’

‘And, Claire, are the clouds between us to pass away for ever now?’ he whispered, as he held her hand.

‘Clouds?’ she said, as she seemed to comprehend him now. ‘No: they can never pass away. Mr. Linnell, I am ill. I hardly know what I say.’

‘Then trust me,’ he said. ‘I will take you back.’

‘Yes—if you will,’ she said vacantly. ‘I have been so ill. I hardly know—why I am here.’

‘But you understand me, Claire?’ he said softly.

‘Yes : I think I understand you.’

‘Then remember this,’ he said. ‘You have shrunk from me, and there has been a terrible estrangement through all your troubles ; but, mark this, Claire Denville, I love you. Let me say those simple words again, and let their simplicity and truth bear them home to your heart. I love you, as I always have loved and always shall. You will turn to me, dearest, now.’

‘It is impossible,’ she said gravely, and she seemed moment by moment to be growing clearer.

‘But I love you,’ he pleaded.

‘And they ask for my love and help,’ she said, with a sudden flash back into the full power of her intellect. ‘My poor suffering father—my sister—my wounded brother. Can you not see that there is a social gulf between us too?’

‘No,’ he said, drawing her to him, and once more kissing her brow. ‘I only see the sweet, true woman who has been a martyr—I only see my love.’

She did not speak for a few moments : and then the vacant manner returned somewhat, as she said to him, laying her hand upon his arm :

‘I seemed drawn here. I could not help it. That would be too horrible. Take me back.’

He drew her arm once more through his, and led her

up the steps and back to the Barclays' house, where he paused upon the steps.

‘Always yours, Claire. I am going to work again in your service. I am yours, and yours alone.’

She shook her head sadly as the door was opened by Mrs. Barclay, who shrank back with a smile to let both enter; but Claire glided in, and Richard Linnell remained.

‘I am glad,’ whispered Mrs. Barclay. ‘Why don’t you come in?’

‘Hush!’ he whispered. ‘Poor girl! she is half mad with her misery. Mrs. Barclay, you must not let her go out of your sight. Good-night. Good-night.’

He walked rapidly away, and Mrs. Barclay followed Claire into the dining-room, where the poor girl was kneeling by a chair and weeping bitterly for the lost love that she felt could never be hers; but as she wept the tears seemed to give rest and lightness to her over-taxed brain, and at last she sank fast asleep like a weary child, her head upon her old friend’s lap, and her breathing coming more regularly and deep than at any time since the night of the murder.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### A REVELATION.

‘Don’t, pray don’t talk to me, Mrs. Barclay,’ said Claire piteously. ‘Let me lie back here and think and rest for a few minutes, and then I must go up to May.’

‘No, no, no, my dear; you let poor May alone a bit. She’s getting on right enough, and you want more attention than she does. And don’t think, my dear. Have patience. Things may turn out all right.’

‘No,’ said Claire, with a sigh. ‘There is no hope now.’

‘Oh, yes, there is!’ said Mrs. Barclay decisively. ‘Jo-si-ah says a reprieve may come at any moment, for Lord Carboro is trying might and main, and Mr. Richard Linnell—ah, does that touch you?’

‘No, no, hush!’ cried Claire, in agony. ‘Don’t mention his name.’

‘I shall,’ cried Mrs. Barclay. ‘I shall say what I think will do you good, my dear. Mr. Richard Linnell has been working night and day, just as he did at the trial. Now he has been getting a petition signed by everyone in Saltinville, and that’s going to win, I think.’



Claire caught her arm and looked at her with dilating eyes.

‘Yes, I think that’s going to do some good, and we’ve got to trust in Providence, my dear, and wait.’

‘Yes, yes. I do pray fervently for help.’

‘And you’ve got to rouse yourself up, my dear, and do something to keep from thinking.’

‘I can’t—I can’t, dear Mrs. Barclay.’

‘Oh, yes, you can, my dear. Not for yourself; I want you to help me.’

‘Help you?’

‘Yes, my dear; help me.’

‘I’ll try,’ said Claire sadly.

‘That’s my pet; I knew you would.’

She embraced Claire tenderly, and then smoothed her hair, as if proud of her.

‘What shall I do?’ she said to herself. ‘Booking? No: jools always please womenfolk. I like ’em myself.’

‘What am I to do?’ said Claire. ‘I will try, Mrs. Barclay. I must have been a great trouble to you.’

‘A great fiddlestick,’ cried the plump dame. ‘What nonsense! Now I’m going to just dust over and put down all the jools we have in the iron chest. Mr. Barclay’s securities, and some that he has bought. He always likes me to look over them now and then, and mark off any that have been sold or let out, and so on. You’ll help me, won’t you?’

‘Willingly,’ said Claire sadly.

‘That’s a dear. Look there on the other side of the way.’

It's Mr. Linnell again. He's looking up. Go to the window, and return his bow, my dear.'

'No, no, I could not,' cried Claire excitedly.

'Well, then, my dear, I must,' said Mrs. Barclay, suiting the action to the word, and not only bowing, but kissing her plump hands to Linnell again and again. 'There he goes,' she exclaimed. 'Poor young man! I don't know whose fault it is, but some one's wrong; and I don't like to see two who ought to be helpmeets keeping at a distance for nothing.'

Claire's brow contracted, but she said no word, while, after diving into a pocket somewhere beneath her voluminous skirts, Mrs. Barclay brought out a bunch of bright keys, with one of which she opened a great cabinet in a dark corner of the bric-à-brac-filled room.

'Here's where we keep the jools, my dear,' she said, as she took another key and fitted it in a large iron safe within the cabinet. 'My Jo-si-ah says that no housebreakers could open that iron chest if they tried for a week. Now, you help me. Hold your apron and I'll fill it. Then we'll lay the cases on the table and look at them, and compare them with the books, and then put 'em away again.'

Claire smiled sadly as the eager little woman plunged her plump arm into the safe and brought out, one after the other, the quaint, old-fashioned morocco cases of every shape and size; and these were duly laid upon the table, on whose cloth a space had been cleared.

Along with these was a canvas bag of the kind used in a

bank for sovereigns, and a couple of chamois leather bags of similar size and shape.

‘That’s about all,’ said Mrs. Barclay, bustling about with her eyes beaming and her cheeks showing what an artist would term high lights. ‘Now we’ll have a good look at ’em, my dear; all grand people of title’s family jewels that they’ve had to sell or pledge through gambling at the tables. Ah, a very nasty sort of trade, my dear, buying and lending on them; but, as Jo-si-ah says, some people will be fools, and if he didn’t make money from them other folks would.’

She placed a chair for Claire, and another for herself; and then, opening a drawer, she took out a ruddy piece of wash-leather, and what seemed to be an ivory tooth-brush that had grown out of knowledge, and a nail-brush in a state of consumption.

‘I always give ’em a brush up, my dear, before I put ’em away. Jo-si-ah likes to see ’em kept in good order. He says they look so much more valuable when they’re brought out.’

She opened one faded red case by pressing on the snap, and laid bare a diamond necklet in old-fashioned silver setting, the gems sparkling in the light as they were moved; for they were evidently of considerable value.

‘There,’ she cried; ‘those once belonged to a duchess, my dear, but they’re ours now. Jo-si-ah said I might wear ’em if I liked; but they’re too fine for me. They’d look lovely on your soft white neck. Let me try ’em.’

‘No, no—pray!’ cried Claire in alarm, as she shrank away with such a look of wild horror in her eyes that Mrs. Barclay laid the jewels down.

‘Why, my pretty!’ she said tenderly, ‘what a fuss to make about nothing.’

‘Yes, yes, it was, I know,’ said Claire, with a forced laugh. ‘It was very foolish of me; but—don’t—do that again.’

‘No; if you don’t wish it, my dear, of course,’ said Mrs. Barclay; and she looked across wonderingly at her companion, for she could not comprehend how the sight of those diamonds and the attempt to place them on her neck had recalled the back drawing-room at the house on the Parade, with the hideous old woman sitting up in bed with her jewels about her on the coverlid and on her arms and neck. The sight of diamonds had become hateful to Claire, and she was ready to leave the table, but the thought of seeming strange to Mrs. Barclay restrained her.

‘Poor old girl! she had to wear paste, as lots of them do when they sell their jewels, my dear. Ah, they’re a beggarly set; when once they take to gambling they don’t seem to be fine ladies any longer. Back you go in the box.’

*Snap.*

Mrs. Barclay had given the diamond necklet a brush and a rub while she was speaking; and then, taking up and opening a book, she handed it to Claire, bidding her look out for the Duchess of Duligne’s diamonds, and make a pencil tick against them.

This done and the morocco case replaced in the safe,

another was taken up and opened, displaying a ruby and gold bracelet.

‘There, I’ll put that on my wrist,’ said Mrs. Barclay, suiting the action to the word. I won’t ask you to have it on, my dear. Some girls would want to, and wouldn’t like ’em taken off again. But you’re different to most people. Look at that now. Jewels always seem best against skin and flesh, but there, my gracious, how fat I am getting! Why it won’t snap round my wrist! Think of that.’

She laughed as merrily as a girl as she held up the glittering gems, and then started, with a loud ‘Lor’ bless me!’

For just then there was a tremendous double knock at the door; and, jumping up with wonderful activity for one of her size, she trotted across to the window.

‘Why, it’s Cora Dean, my dear. No, no: don’t go,’ she continued, as Claire rose hastily.

‘I do not feel as if I could meet her, Mrs. Barclay,’ Claire pleaded.

‘But she’s nobody, my dear, and she’ll be so hurt if you go, for I’m sure to let out that you were here just now.’

‘Miss Dean, ma’am,’ said the servant, opening the door; and Claire’s indecision was cut short by Cora going straight to her, taking her hand and kissing her, before bestowing the same salute upon Mrs. Barclay.

‘I am glad to see you, my dear,’ said the latter volubly, for she was nervously afraid that Claire would go, and of

the opinion that the best way to set both at their ease was to talk.

‘I ought to have been here before,’ said Cora, ‘but my mother has been ill. Don’t think me unkind, Claire Denville.’

She bent over and took Claire’s hand, and met her eyes with a curious wistful look that was full of affection; but, as in some clear gem, such as lay beside them on the table, there was a hidden fire that kept darting forth, and that fire was the vainly-smothered bitter jealousy that was the torment of her life.

‘It was very kind of you to come,’ said Claire quietly; and there was a coldness in her manner that seemed to make Cora’s jealousy glow more fiercely, for the fire flashed up, and the wistful affectionate look seemed to be burning fast away.

It was only a matter of moments, though, for a change came over Claire. It was as if something within her whispered:

‘Why should I be bitter and envious, and hate her for winning a happiness that could never be mine.’

With a quick movement and a low hysterical cry, she threw her arms round Cora’s neck and hid her face in her bosom, sobbing bitterly at first; and then, as Cora held her tightly in her embrace, and soothed and caressed her, the sobs grew less violent, the tears fell more slowly, and at last she raised her face and gazed in her friend’s eyes, offering her lips with a simple child-like motion for the kiss in which they were joined——



‘Oh—oh—oh—oh! Don’t you take any notice of me, my dears,’ burst forth Mrs. Barclay. ‘It’s only my foolishness, but I couldn’t keep it back. There, there,’ she cried in a choking voice, ‘I’m better now—I’m getting better now. I couldn’t help it though. There!’

She dabbed her eyes with her scented handkerchief, and beaming on both in turns, she gave first one and then the other a hug full of affection.

‘It does me good, my dears, to see you both real friends at last; and now let’s be sensible and chat together till I’ve finished these jools, and then we’ll have a nice strong cup of tea.’

Neither Claire nor Cora spoke, but sat with full hearts, and with a feeling of relief stealing over them as their hostess prattled on, opening case after case, and drawing the book to herself so as not to trouble Claire.

‘Look at those, my dears; real choice pearls. Ain’t they lovely?’ she said as she took out a ring from its tiny box. ‘They’re small, but they’re as good as good. Pearls always go best on dark people. Now just you try that on, Cora Dean, my dear. No; that finger’s a little too large, and that’s too small. That’s it to a T; just a fit.’

‘It is beautiful,’ said Cora, admiring the pearls. ‘Look, Claire.’

‘Yes, said Claire, smiling; ‘they are very beautiful.’

‘Not as you want jools on you, my dear,’ said Mrs. Barclay, ‘with a face, and rich red mouth, and throat, and hair,

like you have. You want no jools to make you handsome as handsome can be.'

'Oh, yes, I do, Mrs. Barclay; and I did not know that you had taken to flattery,' cried Cora, laughing.

'Tain't flattery, my dear, it's truth,' said Mrs. Barclay; 'and I can't say which is the handsomer—you or Claire Denville there—for you're both right in your own ways. You neither of you want jools.'

'I do, Mrs. Barclay, and I mean to have this ring if it is for sale. How much is it? It's lovely.'

'It is for sale, my dear,' cried Mrs. Barclay; 'and you shall have it and pay for it.'

'And the price?'

'The price is that you're to be a good true friend to Claire Denville there, as long as you live, and '—a hearty smack on Cora's Juno-like red lips—'there's the receipt, my dear.'

'But, Mrs. Barclay—'

'Not another word, my dear,' cried the plump lady. 'There's the little case, and—there!' she continued, taking up a pen and writing, as she muttered, 'Half-hoop oriental pearl ring: Countess of Dinster. S—o—l—d. There.'

She looked up, smiling with satisfaction, and busily opened another case.

'But, really, Mrs. Barclay,' began Cora, 'such an expensive ring.'

'Why, bless your heart, my dear, you don't think I look upon such a thing as that as expensive. Why, I've only to say to my Jo-si-ah I want a set of diamonds, and if they

were worth a couple of thousand pounds he'd give 'em to me directly. There, I won't hear no more. These are nice, ain't they, my dears? Emeralds—real.'

She held up a glittering green suite.

'Look at the flaws in them. Shows how good they are. Look at these sapphires and diamonds mixed, too. They're worth a good thousand, they are.'

She spread out the beautiful stones, and Cora's eyes glistened with pleasure as case after case was opened, for it was a feast for her that she thoroughly enjoyed, while Claire sat looking on listless and sad till the task was nearly done.

'I wouldn't spend so much time over them, my dears,' said Mrs. Barclay, 'only I think you like seeing 'em. There, now, there's only these three lots to open.'

She took a wash-leather bag and opened it, to pour out some rough-looking crystals into her hand, as if it had been grain at a corn-market.

'Rough diamonds, dear,' she said to Cora; and, pouring them back, she retied the bag, and took the other and served it the same. 'Seed pearls, those are, and worth more than you'd think.'

This bag was also retied and placed in the safe, nothing being left but the canvas packet.

'Ah!' said Mrs. Barclay, 'I always mean to get a case made for this lot, every time I see them. They're not much good, but it would set them off.'

As she spoke she untied the bag, turned it over, and, taking hold of the bottom, shook out on the table a necklet, cross,

tiara, and pair of bracelets, which tinkled as they fell on the table.

‘You’ll spoil them,’ said Cora, taking up the tiara admiringly.

‘Spoil them? Not I, my dear. You couldn’t spoil them.’

‘But they are very beautiful,’ said Cora, taking up the cross by the little ring at the top. ‘Look, Claire dear. Why, I——’

Claire turned her eyes upon them slowly, and then her countenance changed, and she uttered a cry:

‘Lady Teigne’s diamonds!’

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### THE SELLER OF THE GEMS.

‘LADY TEIGNE’S diamonds!’ exclaimed Claire.

‘Nonsense, my dear!’ said Mrs. Barclay. ‘They’re not. Now don’t you get letting your poor head run upon them. Whoever did that dreadful deed took them up to London, and sold ’em, or sent ’em to Amsterdam.’

‘But they are,’ cried Claire, growing more excited. ‘I am sure of it. I know them so well.’

As she spoke she seized the jewels, and turned them over and over with feverish haste, her face convulsed with horror.

‘Nonsense, nonsense, my dear child,’ said Mrs. Barclay.

‘It is very curious,’ said Cora, looking at the ornaments eagerly. ‘I seem to have seen them before.’

‘Some like ’em, my dear. Lots of ’em are made and sold.’

‘Mrs. Barclay, I know those are Lady Teigne’s diamonds,’ cried Claire again.

‘And I know they are not, my dear child. I’ll tell you why: they’re not diamonds at all, only some fairish imitations—paste—that my Jo-si-ah bought.’

‘No, no,’ persisted Claire; ‘they are valuable diamonds.’

‘Well, my dear, I’m not a clever woman at all; but I’ve had so much to do with precious stones that I can’t help telling ’em directly. There’s nothing valu’ble about them but the silver setting, and if you melt that down there isn’t ten pounds’ worth in the lot.’

‘Mrs. Barclay——’

‘Ah, I’m right, my dear. Those aren’t diamonds, but paste; and I remember Josiah saying when I laughed at him, and asked him if he had been taken in—I remember him saying that they were a good-looking lot, and he should keep ’em to let on hire to some lively lady who wanted a suite, and whom he didn’t care to trust with diamonds. There, now, are you satisfied?’

‘No,’ cried Claire. ‘I am certain that I am right. That cross! I know it so well. I’ve had it in my hands a hundred times. Those bracelets, too. I have often clasped them on Lady Teigne’s wrists.’

‘And put that ornament in her hair, and the other thing round her neck?’ said Mrs. Barclay, smiling.

‘Yes, often; so often,’ cried Claire. ‘Oh, tell me what this means. Of whom did you buy them?’

‘Well, that I can’t say, my dear; but I’m going to show you that you are wrong,’ said Mrs. Barclay, laughing and showing her white teeth. ‘Now look here,’ she continued, as she took up the necklet, and then, crossing to the safe, she picked out an old morocco case, which she laid upon the table. ‘Open that, my dear,’ she continued, turning to



Cora. 'There's a necklet in there very much like this.'

Cora pressed the snap spring, and, in obedience to a nod from Mrs. Barclay, took out a brilliant necklet and laid it upon the table.

'There, my dears,' cried the plump little woman; 'those are diamonds! Look at them. Those are brilliants. Look at the fire in them; and now lay these beside them. Where's the fire and bright colours? They'd light up and look shiny by candle-light; but, though they'd deceive some folks, they wouldn't cheat me. My Jo-si-ah has shown me the difference too often. There, then, take my word for it, and let's put them away.'

'No, no,' cried Claire wildly. 'I feel as if I have found out something that might clear up a mystery. I dread to inquire further, but I feel as if I must. Mrs. Barclay—dear Mrs. Barclay—it seems shocking to contradict you so flatly; but you are wrong—I am sure you are wrong. Those are indeed Lady Teigne's diamonds.'

'Now, bless us and save us, my dear, dear child, look here,' cried Mrs. Barclay, taking up the two necklets, one in each hand, and breathing upon them. 'I know these things by heart, my dear. My Jo-si-ah has taught me; and a fine lot of trouble he had, for I'm a stupid old woman. Now look there.'

She breathed on a couple of the largest stones again, and held them out in the light.

'Now see how the breath goes off them, my dears. See

the difference? Those are brilliants. These that you say are Lady Teigne's diamonds are only paste—paste or glass, as the Italians call it. They make lots of 'em very cleverly, and they're shiny and bright, but they are not precious stones. Now then, are you satisfied? Shall I put 'em all away, and ring for tea?'

'No,' said Claire, trembling; 'I am not satisfied; and though I feel as if I were going to find out something horrible, I must—I must go on.'

'Well—well—well, then, my dear, so you shall go on. I'll do anything to humour you, and try and make you a bit happier. Now, then, what's to be done? Let me warn you, though, that I'm right, and those are not diamonds at all, only bits of glass, with some tinfoil behind to make 'em shine.'

Claire eagerly examined the jewels again one by one.

'Yes—see—both of you,' she cried excitedly; 'there is the tiny slip of card I put under that snap, because the spring had grown so weak; and there should be a little scratch and a chip in one of the big diamonds in the tiara. No—no—I can't see it,' she said hurriedly.

'A scratch and a chip on a diamond!' said Mrs. Barclay, smiling. 'Oh, my dear, my dear!'

'Yes. There are the marks,' cried Claire excitedly. 'Look, both of you, look!'

'Well, so they are, my dear,' acquiesced Mrs. Barclay. 'Well, that is strange! But that don't make 'em diamonds, you know. It only proves what I said—that they are paste.'

‘They were Lady Teigne’s jewels,’ cried Claire; ‘and I always believed them to be diamonds.’

‘Well,’ cried Mrs. Barclay, ‘and some one killed that poor old creature for the sake of getting a few bits of paste. Ugh!’

She threw down the necklet she held with a look of disgust. ‘If I’d ha’ known I wouldn’t ha’ touched ’em. My Jo-si-ah couldn’t ha’ known, or he wouldn’t ha’ bought ’em. This must be cleared up.’

She went toward the bell, but Claire followed and caught her arm.

‘What are you going to do?’ she said, with an ashy face.

‘Ring and ask my Jo-si-ah to come up and talk this over. We don’t deal in stolen goods.’

‘No; don’t, don’t.’

‘But we must find out where he bought the things.’

‘No, no! I couldn’t bear to know,’ faltered Claire.

‘No, Mrs. Barclay, pray don’t ask.’

‘Oh, my poor darling! Catch her, Cora, my dear,’ cried Mrs. Barclay, as Claire staggered back, half fainting, and was helped to the sofa, and fanned and recovered with smelling-salts.

She was just getting rid of the deadly hue when the door opened, and Barclay came in with a bluff ‘How do, ladies? Why, hallo! what’s the matter?’

‘Hush! she’s coming round,’ said Mrs. Barclay.

‘That’s better. Why, what are you doing with these things?’

‘I had them out, dear, to check off and brush a little. Claire was helping me.’

‘Mr. Barclay,’ said Claire, rising, and taking a step or two to the table, and speaking with a forced decision that startled her hearers, ‘I must speak. I must know. Tell me——’

She faltered, and pressed her hands to her brow, shivering and turning ghastly pale again.

‘Oh, my dear!’ cried Mrs. Barclay; ‘she’s going to faint!’

‘No, no,’ said Claire, in a weak voice. ‘Don’t touch me. I must speak—I must know. Mr. Barclay,’ she cried, picking up the jewels, ‘where did you get these diamonds?’

‘These, my dear?’ said the money-lender, taking them from her. ‘Not diamonds at all—paste.’

‘There!’ cried Mrs. Barclay triumphantly.

‘But where—where did you get them? Pray, pray speak. It is agony, this suspense.’

‘Get them, my dear? Don’t take it like that. Why, what’s the matter?’

‘She says——’ began Mrs. Barclay.

‘They are Lady Teigne’s jewels,’ cried Claire. ‘Tell me, how came you by them?’

‘Bought ’em, my dear, of Fisherman Dick—Miggles, you know; him as your brother Morton went fishing with.’

‘Yes,’ cried Cora. ‘I remember now, he brought them to us. He said he dredged them up in his shrimp net off the end of the pier.’

‘That’s what he told me too, I remember,’ said Barclay.

‘And he thought they were mine,’ said Cora. ‘He brought them with the carriage clock and my bag, but, of course, they were not mine.’

Fisherman Dick—her brother—dredged up off the end of the pier! It was no elucidation of the mystery, Claire felt, as she stood there trembling.

‘Lady Teigne’s jewels?’ said Barclay, turning them over, and speaking in his blunt way. ‘Then whoever killed the poor old woman found out that these things were good for nothing, and threw them into the sea.’

‘Oh, my dear, my dear!’ sighed Mrs. Barclay. ‘Don’t, pray don’t faint.’

Poor Claire did not hear her, for as she realized that here was perhaps a fresh link of evidence against her father, a link whose fitting she did not see, her brain reeled and she would have fallen had not Cora been close at hand.

‘Can I do anything?’ said Barclay in his abrupt way.

‘Yes,’ cried Mrs. Barclay sharply. ‘Go. Can’t you see we must cut her laces?’

‘Humph!’ ejaculated Barclay thoughtfully; ‘Lady Teigne’s jewels! I never thought of that. No wonder. It was diamonds missing—not paste thrown off the pier.’

He shook his head as he reached the door, and stood with the handle in his hand.

‘Fisherman Dick, eh? Well, I’ll go and see what he has to say.’

## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE TOUGH WITNESS.

‘SHALL I go alone?’ said Josiah Barclay, as he stood upon his doorstep. ‘No, it’s wise to keep your own counsel sometimes, but at others it’s just as well to have witnesses. Who shall I take? Richard Linnell,’ he said, after a pause. ‘He’s the fellow. I’m afraid, though, it looks worse for the old man than it did before. Dick Miggles is as honest as the day as long as he is not smuggling; and he would no more think of choking an old woman than flying. I shouldn’t like to be the revenue officer opposite to him in a row if Master Dick had a pistol in his hand; but he would consider that to be a matter of business. Yes: it looks worse for the old man after all.’

Barclay walked sharply down to the Parade, and went up to the house where Mrs. Dean was seated at one of the windows, bemoaning the absence of Cora, and murmuring at her sufferings, as she leaned back flushed, and with her throbbing head in her hand.

For she was very ill, and very ill-tempered, consequent upon her complaint—a weakness and succumbing of her fort,

after a long and combined attack made by veal cutlets, new bread, and port wine.

She saw Barclay come up, and declared that he should wait for his rent this time if she died for it.

To her great disappointment, as she felt just in the humour, as she termed it, 'for a row,' Barclay stopped below in Mellersh's room, where Richard Linnell was seated with the Colonel.

'Business with me, Mr. Barclay?' said Linnell, flushing. 'Yes, I'll come out with you. No, I have no secrets from Colonel Mellersh.'

Barclay looked sharply at the Colonel, and the latter glanced at his nails and smiled.

'Dick,' he said, leaning back in his chair, 'Mr. Barclay is asking himself whether Gamaliel is a scoundrel, and Paul is a young fool to trust him.'

'No, I wasn't, Colonel,' said Barclay warmly. 'You're a little too much for me, sir, and though you shy the New Testament at me like that (and I never read it), perhaps, money-lender as I am, I'm as honest a man, and as true a friend as you.'

'No doubt about it, my dear Barclay,' said Mellersh with a sneer.

'I wasn't thinking about Gamaliel, or Paul either, sir; but, since you will have it I was asking myself whether you—a clever card-player——'

'Say sharper, Barclay.'

'By gad, I will, sir,' cried Barclay, banging his fist upon



the table—‘a clever sharper—were making believe to be this young gentleman’s friend for your own ends.’

‘Mr. Barclay!’ cried Richard indignantly.

‘Let him be, Dick; I’m not offended. Barclay’s only plain-spoken. The same thing, Barclay, my dear fellow, only I put it more classically. Here, I’ll leave the room, Dick.’

‘No; stop,’ said Richard quickly. ‘Mr. Barclay, I have told you that Colonel Mellersh is my best friend. Please say what you have to say.’

Barclay looked ruffled and bristly, but he mastered his anger, and said sharply:

‘I want you to go down with me, Mr. Linnell, as far as Fisherman Dick’s.’

Richard Linnell stared and looked grave, as he dreaded some fresh trouble and complication.

‘What for?’ he said sharply.

‘Because I believe you take an interest in Miss Claire Denville,’ said Barclay; ‘and there’s something fresh about that murder affair.’

He went on and told what had occurred at his house.

‘Plain enough,’ said Mellersh. ‘The man who did the murder found out that the jewels were false, and he took them and threw them into the sea.’

‘Yes,’ said Barclay drily, ‘I found all that out myself, Colonel. Hang it, gentlemen, don’t let’s fence and be petty,’ he continued. ‘Colonel Mellersh, I beg your pardon, sir, and I ask your help, both of you. What’s to be done? I

bought those sham diamonds of Fisherman Dick, who found them, I suppose, when he was shrimping, and took them to Miss Dean—brought them here, you know.’

Mellersh and Richard Linnell glanced sharply at each other.

‘Thought, you see, that she lost them at the time of the accident. Well, suppose I tell this, it may make the matter worse for poor old Denville. What would you do?’

‘See Fisherman Dick. Perhaps your surmise about the shrimping is wrong. The smuggling rascal may know something more.’

‘Will you come along the cliff with me, then?’

Richard Linnell jumped up, and Mellersh remained—as he was going to dine at the mess. A quarter of an hour later they were at the fisherman’s cottage, where Mrs. Miggles raised her eyes sharply from the potatoes she was peeling, while Dick was engaged in teaching their little foster-child to walk between his knees.

‘Morning, Dick,’ said Barclay, as the great fellow gave them a comprehensive nod, and looked from one to the other suspiciously, Mrs. Miggles gouging out the eyes of a large potato with a vicious action, while her heart beat fast from the effect of best French brandy.

Not from potations, for the sturdy, smuggling fisherman’s wife revelled in nothing stronger than tea; but there were four kegs in the great cupboard, covered with old nets, and a stranger coming to the cottage always seemed to bear a placard on his breast labelled ‘gaol,’ and made her sigh and

wish that smuggling were not such a profitable occupation.

‘We want a few words with you, Miggles,’ said Barclay sharply.

‘Right, sir. Fewer the better,’ said the fisherman surlily, for the visit looked ominous.

‘You brought some ornaments to me one day, and I bought them of you. You remember—months ago?’

‘To be sure I do. You said they was pastry.’

‘Paste, man, paste.’

Fisherman Dick had a thought flash into his head, and he gave his knee such a tremendous slap that the child began to cry.

‘Here, missus, lay holt o’ the little un,’ he cried, passing it to her, as she gave her hands a rub on her apron—almost pitching it as if it had been a little brandy keg. ‘Here, I know, gentlemen,’ he continued, ‘them jools has turned out to be real, and you only give ten shillings.’

‘All they were worth, man. No; they’ve turned out to be what I told you—sham.’

‘Oh!’ said Fisherman Dick in a tone of disappointment. ‘Hear that, missus? Only sham.’

‘But we want to hear how you found them.’

‘How I foun’ ’em? Well, you’ve got ’em; that’s enough for you, arn’t it?’ he grumbled.

‘No. You must speak out—to us mind—and let us know—in confidence—all about it.’

‘I don’t know nothing about ’em at all. I forgets.’

‘No, you don’t. You dredged them up, you said, when you were shrimping and searching for Miss Dean’s bag—after the accident.’

‘How do you know?’ growled the fisherman fiercely.

‘You told Miss Dean so when you took them to her.’

‘And how do you know that?’

‘You told her so when you took them to her, and she told me,’ said Barclay.

‘Then she told you wrong,’ said Fisherman Dick sulkily.

‘It warn’t then.’

‘Look here, my man,’ said Barclay. ‘You may not know it, but very likely you will find yourself in an awkward position if you do not speak out.’

‘Shall I?’ growled the man defiantly.

‘Yes; a very awkward position. You know that Mr. Denville is lying under sentence of death for the murder of Lady Teigne, and stealing her jewels?’

‘Oh, yes; I know all about that,’ growled the fisherman.

‘Well, then, what will you say if I tell you that those ornaments you sold me have been identified as Lady Teigne’s jewels?’

Fisherman Dick’s jaw dropped, and curious patches and blotches of white appeared in his sun-browned face.

‘Oh, Dick! Dick!’ cried his wife, ‘why don’t you tell the truth? No, don’t: it may get you into trouble.’

‘I ain’t going to speak,’ growled Dick. ‘’Tain’t likely.’

‘Hush, Barclay,’ whispered Linnell, taking off his hat as

Claire Denville came up hurriedly, leaning on her brother's arm.

She caught Barclay's hand quickly, and said in a hurried whisper:

'You are inquiring about that, Mr. Barclay? Have you found out anything?'

'No; the fellow will not speak,' said Barclay pettishly.

'Then stop—pray stop!' said Claire. 'Don't ask—don't ask him any more.'

'My dear Claire, this is madness,' cried Morton excitedly. 'We must know the truth.'

'No, no,' said Claire faintly. 'It is better not.'

'I say it is better out. You foolish girl, it is our last chance for him.'

'Morton,' whispered Claire; 'suppose——'

'Better the truth than the doubt,' cried Morton. 'You Dick Miggles——'

'Stop!' cried Richard Linnell. 'Mr. Denville, your sister's wishes should be respected.'

Claire darted a grateful glance at him, and then her face contracted, and she turned from him with a weary sigh.

'Mr. Linnell,' cried Morton, 'I wish to spare my sister's feelings; but it is my duty as my father's son to prove him innocent if I can, and I'll have the truth out of this man.'

'All right, Mr. Mort'n,' said Dick. 'Don't be hard on a fellow. You and me used to be good mates over many a fishing trip, when you used to come down o' nights out o' the balc'ny.'

Morton turned a horrified look upon Fisherman Dick, as the idea flashed across his brain, that the man who knew so well how he came down, must have known the way up. It was but a passing fancy, for there was that in the rough fisherman's countenance that seemed to disarm suspicion.

'Well, what's the matter now, Master Mort'n?'

'I want you to speak out, Dick.'

'Morton—brother!' whispered Claire appealingly.

'Be silent, Claire,' he replied angrily. 'Now, Dick, speak out. You, Mrs. Miggles, you are telling him to be silent. I will not have it. Now, Dick, how did you get those jewels?'

'Shrimped 'em. Off the pier.'

'And how came they there?'

'Chucked in, I s'pose,' growled the fisherman. 'How should I know?'

'Stop!' cried Morton suddenly. 'Let me think—my head is all confused, Mr. Barclay—so much trouble lately, but I seem to recollect—yes. Dick Miggles, you know; some one—that night we were fishing down among the piles under the pier.'

'Yes, I recklect oftens fishing along o' you there, Master Mort'n.'

'Yes, but one night—when I stole down, soon after that terrible business. Why, you recollect, Mr. Linnell. You caught me.'

'Yes, of course. I recollect,' said Linnell eagerly.

'Dick Miggles and I were fishing that night under the pier, and a man came and threw something in.'

Claire turned ghastly pale, and Linnell stretched out his hand to catch her, but she waved him off and stood firm.

‘You recollect, Dick?’

‘No,’ said the fisherman sulkily. ‘I don’t recollect.’

Claire uttered a low moan. It was horrible, and she suffered a martyrdom as she stood there, helpless now to speak or resist, only able, with her hearing terribly acute, to listen to her brother dragging out from this man perhaps some fresh token of her father’s guilt.

‘You do recollect,’ cried Morton fiercely. ‘You got up and looked between the planks, and you said he had thrown something into the sea.’

‘Oh—ah—yes—I recollect now: some one come and threw a stone in.’

‘Some one would not come down to the end of the pier to throw in a stone,’ said Barclay drily.

‘No,’ said Morton; ‘and Dick looked up and watched and saw who it was. He pretended he couldn’t see——’

Claire’s heart sank lower and lower. It was too horrible.

‘But I’m sure he could.’

‘No, Master Mort’n, I couldn’t see.’

‘I noticed your manner then, Dick. I’m sure you did see, and that’s why you did not speak.’

‘What’s why?’ growled Dick, assuming a vacant air.

‘You knew who it was, and that something was thrown in that you meant to dredge for, and you did and found those jewels.’



Fisherman Dick was posed, and he rubbed his boots together ; but he looked more vacant than ever.

‘ You don’t want to be taken to prison and made to speak, Dick ?’

‘ No !’ shouted Mrs. Miggles, ‘ and he shan’t go.’

‘ Then speak out, Dick,’ cried Morton ; but the rough fisherman only frowned and tightened his lips.

‘ No ; I don’t ’member,’ he said, shaking his head.

‘ You do ; and you saw who it was. Speak.’

‘ Morton !’ gasped Claire, staggering to him, and throwing herself on his breast. ‘ I cannot bear it. For God’s sake, stop !’

‘ No,’ cried the lad ; ‘ for my father’s sake I’ll have the truth. You, Dick Miggles, I order you to speak.’

For the first time in his life, as Morton Denville stood there erect and stern, he looked a man.

‘ Can’t,’ said Dick Miggles. ‘ Don’t know.’

‘ You do, you coward !’ cried Morton. ‘ You will not speak for fear of getting into trouble. Look at the trouble we are in, and you might clear us.’

‘ Morton, dear Morton !’ moaned Claire, with horror-stricken face.

‘ Silence, sister !’ cried Morton, throwing her off. ‘ He shall speak : if it was my own father who threw those things into the sea that night. But it was not. It was some man with a heavy tread ; and he stopped and did what my father never did in his life. He was smoking as he stood above our heads, and he got a light and lit a fresh cigar.’

‘ Oh !’

It was a low, piteous wail, full of relief from Claire. It could not have been her father, then, and she leaned helpless on Barclay’s arm.

Morton tried to help his sister, but she smiled at him sadly as she endeavoured to rise, and he turned to Fisherman Dick.

‘ Come, Dick,’ he said, ‘ we used to be good friends and fishermen together.’

‘ Ay, lad, ay, so we did,’ said the rough fellow, with a smile.

‘ Then will you not help me now I am in such trouble ?’

‘ Ay, lad, I’d like to ; but I don’t see how I can.’

‘ Dick Miggles, you’re a coward,’ cried Morton. ‘ When I was a boy——’

‘ Nay, nay, Master Mort’n, take that back again. No coward.’

‘ Yes : a coward,’ cried Morton angrily. ‘ When I was a lad, how many times did I know about cargoes being run, and your house being crammed with spirits and tobacco and lace and silk ?’

‘ How many times, my lad ?’

‘ Yes, how many times ? Wasn’t I always true to you as a mate I fished with ?’

‘ Yes ; that you was, Master Mort’n : that you was.’

‘ And now you see my poor old father condemned for a crime he did not commit, and that must have been done by the wretch who threw those jewels into the water. You

know who did it. You saw him that night, and you will not speak.'

'Dursn't, my lad, dursn't,' growled Miggles.

'You did see him, then?'

Dick Miggles looked in all directions to avoid his questioner's eye, but in vain: Morton went up close to him, and took him by the thick blue woollen jersey he wore, and held him.

'You did see him?'

'Well, all right, then; all right, then, Master Mort'n. I did see him,' growled Miggles, 'but I won't say another word.'

'You shall, if I tear it out of you,' cried Morton. 'Now then: who was it?'

'Dunno!' growled Miggles.

'You do know, sir. Speak out.'

'I can't, Master Mort'n, sir. I dursn't. It would get me into no end of trouble,' said Miggles desperately. 'I can't tell ye. I won't, there!'

He threw Morton off and folded his arms upon his breast, looking at all defiantly.

'I suppose you know, my man,' said Barclay sternly, 'that you will be summoned as a witness before the judge, and forced to speak?'

'No judge won't make me speak unless I like,' said Miggles defiantly. 'I tell you all I won't say another word and get myself into trouble, so there!'

Just then Claire took a step or two forward, laid her hands

upon Dick Miggles' broad breast, and looked up in his great bronzed, bearded face.

The fisherman winced, and his wife hugged the child to her, and uttered a low sob.

'My poor dear father is lying in prison under sentence of death—my poor grey-haired old father,' she said softly. 'Perhaps a word from you will save his life—will save mine, for—for my heart is breaking. I could not live if—if—I cannot say it,' she sobbed in a choking voice, as she sank upon her knees and raised her clasped hands to the great fellow. 'Pray, pray, speak.'

Fisherman Dick's face worked; he stared round him and out to sea; and then, with a low, hoarse sob, he roared out:

'Don't, Miss Claire, don't; I can't abear it. I will speak. It was that big orficer as fought the dool with Mr. Linnell here.'

'Rockley!' cried Morton wildly.

'Ay! Him, Master Mort'n. I see him plain.'

No one spoke, but Linnell involuntarily took off his hat, and Barclay did the same, while Morton stood for a few moments looking down at the rapt countenance of his sister, as with eyes closed and face upturned to heaven she knelt there, apparently unconscious of the presence of others, her lips moving and slowly repeating the thanksgiving flowing mutely from her heart.

No one moved as they stood there in the broad sunshine at the edge of the chalk cliff, with the clear blue sky above their heads, the green down behind, and the far-spreading

glistening sea at their feet. Then Morton Denville softly bent his knee by his sister's side, and to Richard Linnell the silence seemed that of some grand cathedral where a prayer of thanksgiving was being offered up to God.

‘And may I be forgiven, too,’ he muttered, as he looked down on that worn upturned face with the blue veins netting the temples, and the closed eyes, ‘forgiven all my cruel doubts—all my weak suspicions of you, my darling! for I love you with all my heart.’

Claire rose slowly from her knees, taking her brother's hand, and a slight flush came into her cheeks as she saw the reverent attitude of all around.

She looked her thanks, and then turned to Miggles, catching his broad rough hand in both of hers, and kissing it again and again.

‘May God bless you!’ she whispered. ‘You have saved my father's life.’

She let fall the hand, which Miggles raised and thrust in his breast, in a strange, bashful way. Then, turning quickly to Morton, she took his arm and looked at Barclay.

‘Mr. Barclay, will you do what is necessary at once? My brother and I are going over to the gaol.’

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### BROUGHT HOME.

‘GENTLEMEN,’ said Colonel Lascelles, ‘I am going to ask you to excuse me. You know my old fashion—bed betimes. Rockley will take the chair, and I hope you will enjoy yourselves. Good-night.’

The grey-headed old Colonel quitted the mess-room, and the wine was left for the card-tables, after the customary badinage and light conversation that marked these meetings.

It had been a special night, and a few extra toasts had been proposed, notably the healths of Sir Matthew Bray and his lady, it having leaked out that the young baronet had at last led the fair Lady Drelincourt to the altar, with all her charms.

Sir Matthew, prompted a great deal by Sir Harry Payne—who had but lately rejoined the regiment, looking pale and ill—had made his response, and he was a good deal congratulated, the last to speak to him about his noble spouse being Sir Harry.

‘Why, Matt,’ he exclaimed, ‘you look as if you were going to be hung. Aren’t you happy, man?’

‘Happy!’ said Sir Matthew, in deep, melodramatic tones. ‘You speak as if you had not seen my wife.’

Sir Harry stared him full in the face for a few moments, and then burst into a hearty laugh, but winced directly, and drew in his breath sharply, for the knife Louis Gravani had used struck pretty deep.

Card-playing went on for a time, the stakes being light, and then succeeded a bout of drinking, when, with a contemptuous look at Mellersh, Rockley, who had been drinking hard, and was strange and excitable, called upon the party to honour a toast he was about to propose.

‘Claire Denville,’ he cried in a curious, reckless tone which made Sir Harry stare.

Mellersh involuntarily glanced round, as if fearing that Richard Linnell was present.

‘Well, Colonel,’ said Rockley mockingly, ‘you don’t drink. Surely you are not trying to steal away my mistress.’

‘I? No,’ said Mellersh. ‘I did not know you had one.’

‘Hang it, sir!’ cried Rockley, ‘I have just given her name as a toast. Do you refuse to drink it?’

‘Yes,’ said Mellersh coldly. ‘It seems to me bad taste to propose the health of a lady whose father is under sentence of death, and whose brother is dying not many yards away.’

‘Curse you, sir! who are you, to pretend to judge me!’ cried Rockley furiously. ‘Gentlemen, I protest against this sort of thing. What was Lascelles thinking about to invite him, after what has taken place between us?’

‘Here, Rockley, be quiet,’ said Sir Matthew.



‘I shall not,’ cried Rockley. ‘It is an insult to me. The Colonel shall answer for it, and this Mellersh too.’

‘Nonsense!’ cried Sir Harry. ‘Nonsense, man; you can’t quarrel with a guest. Never mind the toast. Sit down, and let’s have a rubber. Rockley’s a bit excited, Mellersh. Don’t take any notice of a few hot words.’

‘Silence!’ cried Rockley, whose voice was thick with the brandy he had been imbibing day by day. ‘I want my toast drunk as it should be—Claire Denville.’

‘Sit down, man,’ cried several of his brother-officers. ‘Here, let’s have a rubber. Sit down, Rockley, and cut. Come, Mellersh.’

The latter shrugged his shoulders, and allowed himself to be drawn into a game, cutting, and finding himself Rockley’s adversary.

He was singularly fortunate, and in addition he played with the skill of a master, the consequence being that he and Sir Harry Payne won.

Rockley rose from the table furious with suppressed anger, and, catching up a pack of cards, he would have thrown them in Mellersh’s face had not Sir Harry struck at his arm, so that the cards flew all over the room.

Mellersh turned pale, but a couple of the most sober officers drew him aside, Sir Matthew joining them directly.

‘Don’t take any notice, Mellersh,’ he said. ‘We’re all sorry. Rockley’s as drunk as an owl. They’re going to get him off to bed.’

‘It was a deliberate insult, gentlemen,’ said Mellersh quietly.

‘Yes, but he doesn’t know what he’s about,’ said Sir Matthew. ‘We all apologize.’

Meanwhile the rest had summoned several of the regimental servants to help in getting Rockley from the room; but he resisted till, seeing that his case was hopeless, he suddenly exclaimed:

‘Well, then, I’ll go, if you’ll let me propose one more toast.’

‘No, no!’ was chorused.

‘Then I shan’t go,’ cried Rockley; ‘I’ll stop and see it out.’

‘Let him give a toast,’ said Sir Harry, ‘and then he’ll go. On your honour, Rockley?’

‘On my honour,’ he said: and he seemed to have grown suddenly sober. ‘Fill, gentlemen. The toast is a lady—not Miss Denville, since it offends Colonel Mellersh. I will give you the health of a lady who has long been one of my favourites. Her health even that arch sharper will not refuse to drink—my mistress, Cora Dean.’

In rapid succession, and in the midst of a deep silence, the claret in Colonel Mellersh’s glass, and the glass itself, were dashed in Major Rockley’s face.

Rockley uttered a howl of rage that did not seem to be human; and he would have sprung at Mellersh’s throat had he not been restrained, while the latter remained perfectly calm.

‘There is no need for us to tear ourselves like brute beasts,

gentlemen,' he said. 'Major Rockley shall have the pleasure of shooting the arch sharper—myself—where you will arrange—to-morrow morning; but before I leave I beg to say that Miss Dean is a lady whom I hold in great honour, and any insult to her is an insult to me.'

'Loose me, Bray. Let me get at the cowardly trickster and cheat,' yelled Rockley. 'He shall not leave here without my mark upon him. Do you hear? Loose me. He shall not go.'

He struggled so furiously that he freed himself and was rushing at Mellersh, when the door was thrown open and the grey-headed old Colonel of the regiment entered.

'What is this?' said the Colonel sternly. 'Major Rockley, are you mad? I have business, sir, at once, with you.'

Rockley stared from one to the other, and seemed to be sobered on the instant.

'Business with me?' he said quickly. 'Well, what is it? Payne, I leave myself in your hands. Now, Colonel, what is it?'

The old Colonel drew aside and pointed to the door.

'Go to my quarters, sir,' he said sternly. 'But you should have some one with you beside me. Sir Harry Payne, you are Major Rockley's greatest intimate. Go with him.'

Sir Harry was, after Mellersh, the most sober of the party, his wound having necessitated his being abstemious, and he turned to the Colonel.

‘He was very drunk,’ he said. ‘We’ll get him to bed. I’ll talk to Mellersh when he is gone, and nothing shall come of it.’

‘You have misunderstood my meaning, Payne,’ said the Colonel sternly. ‘I am not interfering about a card quarrel, sir, or a contemptible brawl about some profligate woman. This is an affair dealing with the honour of our regiment, as well as Major Rockley’s liberty.’

A spasm seemed to have seized Rockley, but he was calm the next moment, and walked steadily to the Colonel’s quarters, not a word being spoken till the old officer threw open the door of his study, and they were in the presence of Lord Carboro’, Barclay, Morton Denville, and the Chief Constable.

The Colonel was the only one who took a chair, the others bowing in answer to the invitation to be seated, and remaining standing.

‘Now, Mr. Denville,’ said the Colonel, ‘Major Rockley is here: will you have the goodness to repeat the words that you said to me? I must warn you, though, once more, that this is a terrible charge against your brother-officer, and against our regiment. I should advise you to be careful, and unless you have undoubted proof of what you say, to hesitate before you repeat the charge.’

‘Sir,’ said Morton, standing forward, ‘I am fighting the battle of my poor father, who has been condemned to death for a crime of which he is innocent.’

‘He has been tried by the laws of his country, Mr. Denville, and convicted.’

‘Because everything seemed so black against him, sir, through the devilish machinations of that man.’

‘Be careful, sir,’ said the Colonel sternly. ‘Once more, be careful.’

‘I must speak out, sir,’ cried Morton firmly. ‘I repeat it—the devilish machinations of this man—who has been the enemy and persecutor of my family ever since he has been here.’

‘To the point, sir,’ said the Colonel, as Rockley stood up with a contemptuous look in his dark eyes, and his tall, well-built figure drawn to his full height.

‘I will to the point, sir,’ said Morton. ‘I charge this man, the insulter and defamer of my sister, with being the murderer of Lady Teigne!’

‘Hah!’

It was Major Rockley who uttered that ejaculation: and, springing forward, he had in an instant seized Morton Denville by the throat and borne him against the wall.

It was a momentary burst of fierce rage that was over directly; and, dropping his hands and stepping back, the Major stood listening as Morton went on.

‘Taking advantage of the similarity of figure between himself and my unfortunate brother, he took Frederick Denville’s uniform one night for a disguise, and to cast the suspicion upon an innocent man, should he be seen, and then went to the house and killed that miserable old woman as she slept.’

‘You hear this charge, Rockley?’ said the Colonel.

‘Yes, I hear,’ was the scornful reply.

‘Go on, Mr. Denville : I am bound to hear you,’ said the Colonel. ‘What reason do you give for this impossible act?’

‘Poverty, sir. Losses at the gaming tables. To gain possession of Lady Teigne’s jewels.’

‘Pish!’ ejaculated Rockley, with his dark eyes flashing.

‘Those jewels proved to be false,’ continued Morton, ‘and at the first opportunity Major Rockley took them, in the dead of the night, and threw them from the end of the pier into the sea.’

‘How do you know that?’ said the Colonel.

‘I was on the platform beneath, fishing, sir; and the fisherman I was with dredged them up afterwards, and sold them to Mr. Barclay.’

‘Yes,’ said that individual. ‘I have them still.’

‘Bah! Absurd!’ cried Rockley, throwing back his head. ‘Colonel Lascelles, are you going to believe this folly?’

‘I am powerless, Major Rockley,’ said the Colonel in a quick, sharp manner. ‘This charge is made in due form.’

‘And it is enough for me, sir,’ said the constable, stepping forward. ‘Major Rockley, I arrest you on the charge of murder.’

Rockley made a quick movement towards the door, but stopped short.

‘Pish! I was surprised,’ he exclaimed, as the constable sprang in his way. ‘What do you want to do?’

‘Take you, sir.’

‘What? Disgraced like this?’ cried Rockley furiously.



‘Colonel, you will not allow the insult to the regiment. Give your word that I will appear.’

‘I am helpless, sir,’ cried the old Colonel.

‘Place me under arrest then, and let me appear in due time.’

‘I claim Major Rockley as my prisoner, sir,’ cried the constable stoutly. ‘I have a warrant in proper form, and my men waiting. This is not an ordinary case.’

‘Oh, very well,’ cried Rockley contemptuously; ‘I am ready. The charge is as ridiculous as it is disgraceful. I presume that I may return to my quarters, and tell my servant to pack up a few necessaries?’

‘Of course; of course, Rockley,’ said the Colonel. ‘There can be no objection to this.’

He looked at the constable as he spoke, but that individual made no reply. He placed himself by Rockley’s side, and Sir Harry Payne went out with them.

‘I don’t believe it, Rockley,’ cried the latter. ‘Here, I’ll stand by you to the end.’

Rockley gave him a grim nod, glanced sharply round, and then strode out to his own quarters only a few yards away.

‘Well, gentlemen,’ said the Colonel, looking from one to the other; ‘this is a most painful business for me. Mr. Denville, as your father’s son, I cannot blame you very much, but if you had been ten years older you would have acted differently.’

‘Colonel Lascelles,’ said Lord Carboro’ coldly, ‘I do



not see how Mr. Morton Denville could have acted differently.'

'I will not argue the point with you, my lord,' said the Colonel. 'May I ask you to——My God! What's that?'

It was a dull report, followed by the hurrying of feet, and the excitement that would ensue in a barrack at the discharge of fire-arms.

Before the Colonel could reach the door, it was thrown open, and Sir Harry Payne staggered in, white as ashes, and sank into a chair.

'Water!' he exclaimed. 'I'm weak yet.'

'What is it? Are you hurt?' cried the Colonel.

'No. Good heavens! how horrible,' faltered the young man with a sob. 'Rockley!'

'Rockley?' cried Morton excitedly.

'He has blown out his brains!'

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### A LONG ADIEU.

MAJOR ROCKLEY's tacit acknowledgment of the truth of the charge against him, and the piecing together of the links, showed how, on the night of Lady Teigne's death, he had been absent from the mess for two hours, during which Fred Denville lay drunk in the officers' quarters—made drunk by the Major's contrivance, so that his uniform could be used. How too, so as further to avert suspicion, the Major had the fiendish audacity to take the party to perform the serenade where the poor old votary of fashion lay dead.

The truth, so long in coming to the surface, prevailed at last, and Stuart Denville, broken and prostrated, found himself the idol of the crowd from Saltinville, who collected to see him freed from the county gaol.

'To the barracks, Claire,' he whispered. 'Let us get away from here.'

They were at the principal hotel, and Claire was standing before him, pale and trembling with emotion.

'Your blessing and forgiveness first,' she murmured. 'Oh, father, that I could be so blind!'

‘So blind?’ he said tenderly, as he took her in his arms. ‘No: say so noble and so true. Did you not stand by me when you could not help believing me guilty, and I could not speak? But we are wasting time. I have sent word to poor Fred. My child, I have his forgiveness to ask for all the past.’

They met the regimental surgeon as they drove up.

‘You have come quickly,’ he said. ‘Did you get my message?’

‘Your message?’ cried Claire, turning pale. ‘Is—is he worse?’

The surgeon bowed his head.

‘I had hopes when you were here last,’ he said gently; ‘but there has been an unfavourable turn. The poor fellow has been asking for you, Miss Denville; you had better come at once.’

He led the way to the infirmary, where the finely-built, strong man lay on the simple pallet, his face telling its own tale more eloquently than words could have spoken it.

‘Ah, little sister,’ he said feebly, as his face lit up with a happy smile. ‘I wanted you. You will not mind staying with me and talking. Tell me,’ he continued, as Claire knelt down by his bed’s head, ‘is it all true, or have they been saying I am innocent to make it easier—now I am going away?’

‘No, no, Fred,’ said Claire; ‘it is true that you are quite innocent.’

‘Is this the truth?’ he said feebly.

‘The truth,’ whispered Claire; ‘and you must live—my brother—to help and protect me.’

‘No,’ he said sadly; ‘it is too late. I’m glad though that I did not kill the old woman. It seemed all a muddle. I was drunk that night. Poor old dad! Can’t they set him free?’

‘My boy!—Fred!—can you forgive me?’ cried Denville, bending over the face that gazed up vacantly in his.

‘Who’s that?’ said the dying man sharply. ‘I can’t see. Only you, Clairry—who’s that? Father?’

‘My son!—my boy! Fred, speak to me—forgive—’

There was a terrible silence in the room as the old man’s piteous cry died out, and he sank upon his knees on the other side of the narrow bed, and laid his wrinkled forehead upon his son’s breast.

‘Forgive?—you, father?’ said Fred at last, in tones that told how rapidly the little life remaining was ebbing away.

‘It’s all right, sir—all a mistake—my life—one long blunder. Take care of Clairry here—and poor little May.’

‘My boy—the mistake has been mine,’ groaned Denville, ‘and I am punished for it now.’

‘No, no—old father—take care—Clairry here.’

He seemed to doze for a few minutes, and Denville rose to go and ask the surgeon if anything could be done.

‘Nothing but make his end as peaceful as you can. Ah, my lad, you here?’

‘Yes,’ said Morton. ‘How is he?’

‘Alive,’ said the surgeon bluntly; and he turned away.

Fred Denville seemed to revive as soon as he was left alone with his sister; and, looking at her fixedly, he seemed to be struggling to make out whose was the face that bent over him.

‘Claire—little sister,’ he said at last, with a smile of rest and content. ‘Claire—Richard Linnell? Tell me.’

‘Oh, Fred, Fred, hush!’ she whispered.

‘No, no! Tell me. I can see you clearly now. It would make me happier. I’m going, dear. A fine, true-hearted fellow; and he loves you. Don’t let yours be a wrecked life too.’

‘Fred! dear Fred!’

‘Let it all be cleared up now—you two. You do love him, sis?’

‘Fred! dear Fred!’ she sobbed; ‘with all my heart.’

‘Ah!’ he said softly, with a sigh of satisfaction. ‘Ask him to come here. No; bring the old man back—and Morton. Don’t cry, my little one; it’s—it’s nothing now, only the long watch ended, and the time for rest.’

\* \* \* \* \*

In another hour he had fallen asleep as calmly as a weary child—sister, father, and brother at his side; and it seemed but a few hours later to Morton Denville that he was marching behind the bearers with the funeral march ringing in his ears, and the muffled drums awaking echoes in his

heart—a heart that throbbed painfully as the farewell volley was fired across the grave.

For Fred Denville's sin against his officers was forgiven, and Colonel Lascelles was one of the first to follow him to the grave.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE EVE OF THE FINISH.

‘A LETTER, Claire, so painful that I shrank from reading it to you, only that I have no secrets from my promised wife.’

‘Does it give you pain?’ said Claire, as she looked up in Richard Linnell’s face, where they sat in the half-light of evening, with the sea spread before them—placid and serene as their life had been during the past few weeks.

‘Bitter pain,’ he said sadly, as he gazed at the saddened face, set off by the simple black in which she was clothed.

‘Then why not let me share it? Is pain so new a thing to me?’

‘So old that I would spare you more; and yet you ought to know my family cares, as I have known yours.’

‘May I read?’ said Claire softly, as she laid her thin white hand upon the letter.

He resigned it to her without a word; but as she opened the folds:

‘Yes; read it,’ he said. ‘It concerns you as much as it does me, and you shall be the judge as to whether the secret shall be kept.’

•



Claire looked up at him wonderingly, and then read the letter aloud.

It was a passionate appeal, and at the same time a confession and a farewell; and, as Claire read on, she grew the more confused and wondering.

For the letter was addressed to Richard Linnell, asking his forgiveness for the many ways in which the writer, in her tender love and earnest desire for his happiness, had stood between him and Claire, ready to spread reports against her fame, and contrive that Linnell should hear them, since the writer had never thoroughly known Claire Denville's heart, but had judged her from the standpoint of her sister. It had been agony to the writer to see Linnell's devotion to a woman whom she believed to be unworthy of his love; and as his father's life had been wrecked by a woman's deceit, the writer had sworn to leave no stone unturned to save the son.

At times the letter grew sadly incoherent, and the tears with which it had been blotted showed its truthfulness, as the writer prayed Richard's forgiveness for fighting against his love and giving him such cruel pain.

'Colonel Mellersh will explain all to you,' the letter went on, 'for he has known everything. It was he who saved me from further degradation, and found the money to buy this business, where I thought to live out my remaining span of life unknown, and only soothed by seeing you at times—you whom I loved so dearly and so well.'

Claire looked up from the letter wonderingly, but Linnell bade her read on.

‘Colonel Mellersh fought hard against my wishes at first, but he yielded at last out of pity. I promised him that I would never make myself known—never approach your father’s home—and I have kept my word. Mellersh has absolved me now that I am leaving here for ever, and I go asking your forgiveness as your wretched mother, and begging you to ask for that of Claire Denville, the sweet, true, faithful woman whom you will soon, I hope, make your wife.

‘Lastly, I pray and charge you not to break the simple, calm happiness of your father’s life by letting him know that his unhappy wife has for years been living so near at hand.’

‘But, Richard,’ cried Claire, ‘I always thought that—that she was dead.’

‘He told me so,’ replied Linnell sadly. ‘She was dead to him. There, you have read all. It was right that you should know. Colonel Mellersh has told me the rest.’

Linnell crumpled up the letter, and then smoothed it out, and folded and placed it in his breast.

‘It is right,’ he said again, ‘that you should know the truth. Mellersh is my father’s oldest friend. They were youths together. When the terrible shock came upon my father that he was alone, and that his wife had fled with a man whom he had made his companion after Mellersh had gone upon foreign service, his whole life was changed, and he became the quiet, subdued recluse you see.’

Linnell paused for a few minutes, and then went on :

‘Mellersh had idolized my mother when she was a bright fashion-loving girl ; but he accepted his fate when she gave the preference to my father. When he came home from India and found what had happened, and that this wretch had cast her off, he shot the betrayer of my father’s name, and then sought out and rescued my mother, placing her as you have read, at her desire, here.’

‘But, Richard dear, I am so dull and foolish—I can only think of one person that this could possibly have been ; and it could not be——’

‘Miss Clode ? Yes, that was the name she took. My mother, Claire. What do you say to me now ?’

Claire rose from her seat gently, and laid her hand upon her arm.

‘We must keep her secret, Richard,’ she said ; ‘but let us go to her together now.’

‘Then you forgive her the injury she did you ?’

‘It was out of love for you ; and she did not know me then. Let us go.’

‘Impossible,’ he said, taking her in his arms. ‘She has left here for ever. Some day we may see her, but the proposal is to come from her.’

They did not hear the door open as they stood clasped in each other’s arms, nor hear it softly closed, nor the whispers on the landing, as one of the visitors half sobbed :

‘Ain’t it lovely, Jo-si-ah ? Did you see ’em ? If it wasn’t rude and wrong, I could stand and watch ’em for hours. It do put one in mind of the days when——’

‘Hold your tongue, you stupid old woman,’ was the gruff reply. ‘It’s quite disgusting. A woman at your time of life wanting to watch a pair of young people there, and no candles lit.’

‘Hush! Don’t talk so loud, or they’ll hear us; and now, Jo-si-ah, as it’s in my mind, I may as well say it to you at once.’

‘Now, look here,’ said Barclay in a low voice, in obedience to his wife’s request, but speaking quickly, ‘I’ve been bitten pretty heavily by the fellows in the regiment that has just gone, so if it’s any new plan of yours that means money, you may stop it, for not a shilling do you get from me. There!’

‘And at your time of life, too! To tell such fibs, Jo-si-ah! Just as if I didn’t know that you’ve made a profit of Sir Harry Payne alone, enough to cover all your losses. Now, look here: I don’t like little Mrs. Burnett, or Gravani, or whatever her name is, but seeing how she’s left alone in the world, and nobody’s wife after all, and poor Mr. Denville is poor Mr. Denville, and it’s a tax upon him, and you’re out so much, I’ve been thinking, I say——’

‘Wouldn’t do, old lady. She’s not the woman who would make our home comfortable; and besides——’

‘But she’s so different, Jo-si-ah, since she has been getting nearly well.’

‘Glad of it, old lady. Hope she’ll keep so. But you forget that Claire will soon be leaving home, and——’

‘What a stupid old woman I am, Jo-si-ah! Why, of course! Her place is there along with her father; and it’s

wonderful how he pets that little child. There now, I'm sure they've had long enough. Let's go in and tell them the news.'

This time Mrs. Barclay tapped at the door softly, before opening it half an inch and saying :

' May we come in ?'

Her answer was the door flung wide, and Claire's arms round her neck.

' We've come to tell you that we've just seen Lord Carboro', my dear, and he told us that he'd heard about your brother from the Colonel of his new regiment, out in Gibraltar, and that he's getting on as well as can be.'

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### A TALE THAT IS TOLD.

IT was just such a visit that Mrs. Barclay paid Claire Den-ville about a fortnight later ; and after one of her extremely warm embraces, she exclaimed :

‘ Guess.’

‘ Guess what, Mrs. Barclay ?’

‘ Who’s married. There, you needn’t blush, my dear, because yours is fixed all right at last, but you’ll never guess who.’

‘ Then tell me,’ said Claire, smiling.

‘ No, guess.’

‘ I cannot. There are so many.’

‘ Then I will tell you. No, no : you’re too late,’ she cried, as Richard Linnell hurriedly entered ; ‘ I’ve brought the news.’

‘ You’ve told her then that Cora Dean is married ?’

‘ Now what a shame, Mr. Richard,’ cried Mrs. Barclay. ‘ I hadn’t time to say it, but I was just going to tell her. But she doesn’t know who to, and I will tell her that. Colonel Mellersh, my dear.’

‘Colonel Mellersh!’ cried Claire.

‘Yes,’ said Richard Linnell. ‘I have just received this from him. A message from them both.’

Claire opened her lips to speak, but her eyes fell upon Richard Linnell’s thoughtful face, and it was he who spoke next, and said slowly:

‘No: now I come to think of it all, I am not surprised.’

Of course, Saltinville talked a great deal about this match, but the worthies of the place talked more about another wedding that took place six months later—a wedding at which Lord Carboro’ insisted upon being the bridegroom’s best man.

It was upon that occasion, after returning from the church, that Lord Carboro’ took a casket from his pocket and placed it in Claire’s hands.

‘The old jewels, my dear, that I have prized because you refused them once before. God bless you! and I know He will.’

The old man turned quickly away with his face working, and crossed to the Master of the Ceremonies, who was looking very much his old self, in his meagrely furnished drawingroom, and tapped him half angrily upon the shoulder.

‘Hang it all, Denville,’ he cried, ‘can’t you see I’ve forgotten my snuff-box, and am dying for a pinch? The old box, sir—His Royal Highness’s box. Hah! That’s better,’ he ejaculated, after dipping his thin white finger and thumb in the chased gold box, ‘a friend at a pinch, eh, Denville,



eh? Damme, sir, your young wits and beaux don't often beat that, eh? The old school's passing away, Denville, eh? passing away.'

'With the noblemen who are your lordship's contemporaries.'

'Tut-tut-tut! Denville, don't. Never mind the lordship. We must be better friends, man—better friends for our little fag ends of troubled lives. Hush! No more now. This is the bride and bridegroom's day.'

There were many strangers who, visiting Saltinville, were ready to smile at the tottering white-haired beau, so elaborately dressed, and who, not from need, but from custom, clung to his old habits and received visitors as Master of the Ceremonies still. It was a quaint old fiction, and he used to glory in his fees, now they were only wanted for a purpose he had in view.

There were other laughs too ready to be bestowed upon the palsied old nobleman in the dark wig, who met the Master of the Ceremonies every morning on the Parade, and took snuff with him as they flourished their canes, and flicked away fancied spots of dust. Their high collars and pantaloons and Hessian boots, all came in for notice. So did those wonderful beaver hats, black for winter, white for summer, which were lifted with such a display of deportment, in return to the salutes of those who were taking the air. It was always the same: they met at the same hour, at the same spot, took snuff, chatted upon the same themes,

and then strolled down to the end of the pier talking of how 'times have changed, sir : times have changed.'

'Who's him, sir—old chap in the black wig, and a face like a wooden nut-cracker? Oh, he's old Lord Carboro'.'

'And the other?' said the stranger, who had been questioning Fisherman Dick, as the old men passed them by.

'T'other, sir? Ah, I could tell you a deal about him. That's the Master o' the Ceremonies, that is. I could tell you a long story about he.'

And so he did.

THE END.





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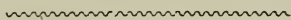
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THE LETTERS OF GEORGE SAND—*continued.*

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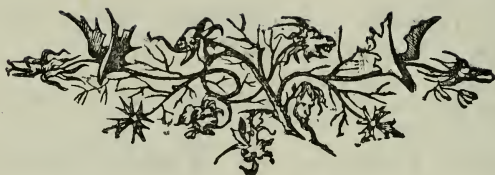
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